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Issue 383
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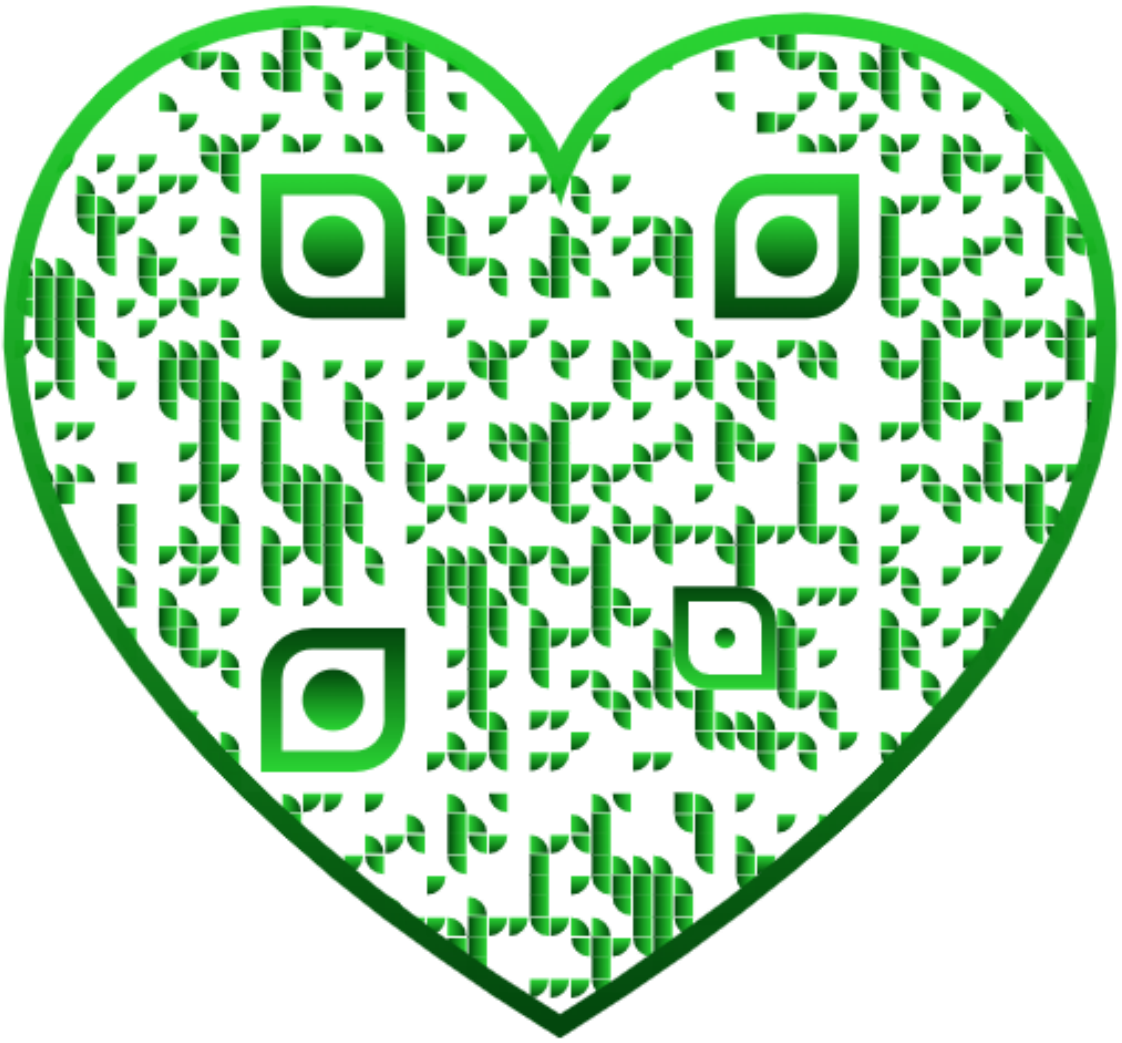
LORAINE JAMES
ACT!
NIK COLK VOID
TIM DELUXE
ULTRA NATÉ
RUTH ROYALL
MICHAEL SCOTT
MICHAEL DAWSON
CLAIRE ROUSAY

THE AMBIENT ISSUE

CREATING MUSICAL ATMOSPHERIC ELECTRONIC MUSIC AT ITS MOST ATMOSPHERIC

FUTURE



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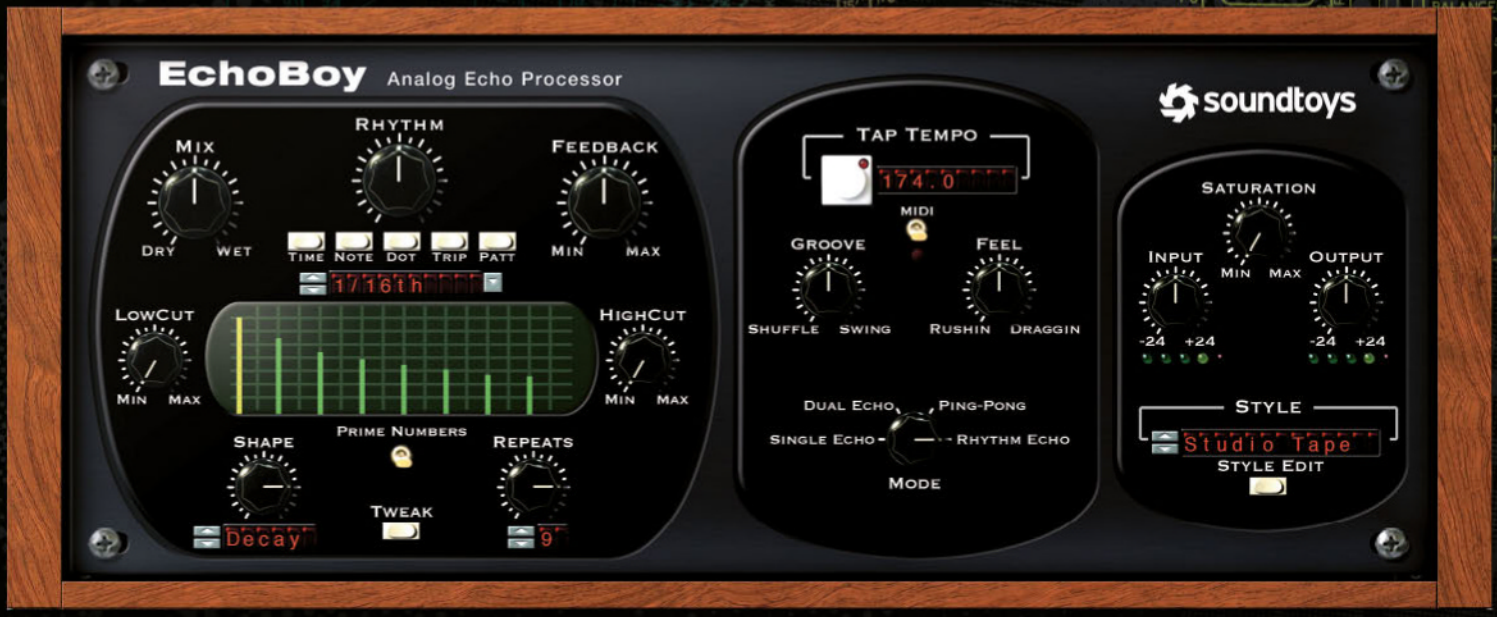

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Atmospheric pressure

Ambient music can sometimes be written off as something of a joke genre – aimless background music that's as easy to make as it is to listen to. Despite what any detractors might say though, 'ambient' is more than just a flash in the pan. We're now more than five decades on from Brian Eno's pivotal ambient releases, and the sound and approaches of ambient music reach back considerably further than that.

If anything, ambient music is experiencing something of a renaissance, thanks to artists like Jon Hopkins pushing ambient electronics forward, and countless others blending elements of ambient into genres as diverse as jazz, classical and techno.

What better time then, to get in touch with your contemplative side and explore a more freeform, textural approach to making music?

We hope you enjoy the issue.

Si Truss, Editor-In-Chief
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INCLUDES VIDEO

The Bristol DnB vocal powerhouse on her gospel-inspired vocal chain and journey from session musician to producer

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- Hip-Hop Drum Machines (387 samples)
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- Classic Breakbeats (371 samples)
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- '70s Synths Pt 2 (192 samples)

'80S SYNTHS
- '80s Synths Pt 1 (265 samples)
- '80s Synths Pt 2 (279 samples)

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- '90s Synths Pt 1 (414 samples)
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- '00s Synths Pt 1 (308 samples)
- '00s Synths Pt 2 (188 samples)

DRUM HITS
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- Rims 'n' Things (549 samples)
- Resonator Percussion (502 samples)
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LO-FI TOOLS
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We explore the past, present and future of ambient music and some of the tools that have kept the genre alive for decades

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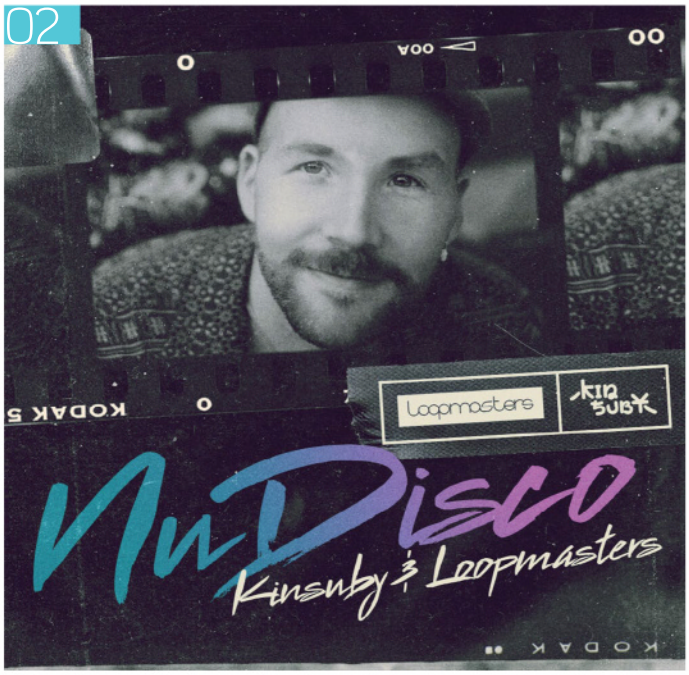

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Universal Audio launch native Spark plugin subscription

Use UAD effects and virtual instruments without the DSP chip system

The past couple of years have seen Universal Audio performing some significant – although not unwelcome – u-turns in the way their business works. UA have been known for a variety of things over the years, from makers of analogue hardware to, in recent times, innovators in the guitar realm, but for the past couple of decades the Californian brand has mainly been synonymous with their linked ecosystem of UAD plugins and Apollo interfaces.

Traditionally, it has worked like this: UA interfaces come equipped with built-in DSP chips, which allow them to run low-latency UAD effect plugins that boast circuit-level emulation of classic studio hardware. Those two parts of the ecosystem were intrinsically linked; if you wanted in on the UAD system, compatible hardware was your only way in.

Two major changes have happened in recent months though. Firstly, UA launched their impressive Volt interfaces, which were not only considerably more affordable than other UA hardware, but also completely eschewed DSP in favour of simple analogue effects. Now UA are taking an even more significant step in launching Spark, an entirely native collection of UAD plugins.

Spark is a subscription service – currently Mac-only, but with PC versions on the horizon – that gives users full access to a range of instruments and effects that can be used anywhere without the need for any UA hardware. It's a significant move although not an entirely surprising one; not only are subscription packages all-the-rage in the modern plugin realm, but in the age of power laptops and M1 chips, the idea of requiring external DSP to run your plugins seems like something of an anachronism.

What's included?

Right now Spark offers access to nine effect processors and four instruments. The effects are mostly staples of the UAD platform, but taken together form a well-rounded suite of classic studio gear. That lineup is the Neve 1073 Preamp &

EQ Channel Strip, API Vision Channel Strip, UA 1176 Classic Limiter Collection, Teletronix LA-2A Leveler Collection, API Vision Channel Strip, Lexicon 224 Digital Reverb, Studer A800 Tape Recorder, API 2500 Bus Compressor, Galaxy Tape Echo and Pure Plate Reverb.

On top of this, Spark users get four virtual instrument plugins. Two come across from UA's Luna DAW – the Moog Minimoog and Ravel Grand Piano, which offer recreations of the Model D synth and a Steinway Model B grand piano respectively. There's also a new Waterfall B3 Hammond organ recreation, which uses physical and circuit modelling to emulate every intricacy of the Hammond B3, and there's also a "three-dimensional" emulation of a Leslie 147 rotary speaker cabinet.

Of most interest though is UA's brand new synth plugin Opal, which combines virtual analogue and wavetable synthesis in UI designed around creating morphable sounds. In use it reminds us a little of Arturia Pigments (albeit with fewer synthesis modes) as well as FXpansion's Strobe2. UA's effect processing know-how is brought fully to bear, too, with the help of onboard reverb, tape delay, modulation effects and 1176-style compression.

Hands-on

As far as we can tell, the existing UAD plugins included with Spark (here called UADx) are identical to their existing counterparts. So how does the experience of using plugins designed for external DSP on a native system work in practice? While we've not tested Spark extensively – we'll save that for a full review – we've been impressed by our initial tests. There is more latency than when tracked directly through a UA interface, but we managed to add instances of each instrument to a project, along with over 10 effect instances, without our 2020 M1 Mac breaking much of a sweat (and at the time of writing the plugins are still running via Rosetta).

Spark is billed as an evolving platform that will cost you $20 a month (plus taxes outside the US), though you can try before you buy with a 14-day free trial. If you own one of UA's Volt audio interfaces, meanwhile, you can try Spark free for a month.

It's also worth mentioning that, if you're a UAD hardware owner and have already purchased a perpetual licence of a UAD plugin featured in Spark, you'll get the native version for free (no subscription is required). So, you'll finally be able to take that plugin wherever you go, regardless of whether your Apollo or other UAD hardware has come along for the ride with you. **FM**

Korg unveil updated Volca FM

Korg's compact, DX7-inspired Volca FM first landed six years ago and it remains one of our favourite mini synths to this day. Now, like the Volca Sample before it, the FM is getting a second generation update bringing a raft of new features and enhancements.

While the new Volca FM looks pretty much identical to its predecessor, there are some significant changes that enhance its capabilities considerably. First and foremost of these is expanded polyphony, up to six voices compared to the original's three. The new Volca FM now responds to velocity via MIDI too, for a more expressive experience when used with an external controller.

Also on the MIDI front, Korg have added a MIDI output (via a TRS adapter) allowing the Volca FM's sequencer to control external gear. That sequencer sees some enhancements itself, including a pattern randomisation tool for auto-generating ideas. This joins other sequencer functions including Warp Active Step – which alters the distribution of sequencer steps for interesting rhythmic ideas – and pattern chaining.

The second gen FM gains a new effect too, with a digital shimmering reverb joining the existing chorus.

As with the original, the FM's synth engine is based on the 32-algorithm design of Yamaha's DX7 and can even import classic patches via Sysex. While the interface can be a little fiddly for deep parameter editing, the FM can make use of a free online editor for more advanced patch creation.

The new Volca FM is due to arrive mid-May with a price to be confirmed. **FM**

The Crystalline algorithmic reverb plugin sounds "almost unreal"

Said to "stand on the shoulders of 60 years of chasing 'the holy grail of DSP'", Baby Audio's Crystalline is a new algorithmic reverb plugin that harks back to classic digital reverbs of the past while taking advantage of modern processing power. The result is a plugin that promises everything that today's DAW-based producer needs.

For a start, Crystalline enables you to hard-sync the reverb attack and decay time to your DAW's tempo, creating reflections that sync with the music. That being said, you still have the option of setting the pre-delay and decay times in milliseconds if you'd rather.

A dedicated Reflections section, meanwhile, enables you to set the size of the room, add 'Sparkle' – which emphasises the high frequencies within the reverb algorithm – and set the width.

The Depth section, meanwhile, can be used to set the resolution of the reverb algorithm, add pitch modulation and adjust the level of 'Shimmer' (this makes the high frequencies of the reverb tail decay lower than the rest of the spectrum).

Over in the Clean-Up section you can remove high or low frequency content, filter-out stereo information from the low-end of the reverb and use the gate to create that classic '80s reverb sound. The Shape section offers Tone, Smoothing and Transients controls, while the Output section features two ducker settings, reverse and freeze options and a dry/wet control.

Baby Audio say that the overall sound of Crystalline is "almost unreal" in the sense its spaces are closer to what you'd dream of having rather than what you've actually experienced. It runs on PC/Mac in VST/AU/AAX formats and comes with more than 300 presets.

Crystalline's full price is $99, but it's available for the intro price of $49. A demo version is also available. FM

EZdrummer 3 is more songwriter-friendly than ever

Toontrack have launched EZdrummer 3, the latest version of their accessible drum sampling and groove generation software. This is designed to make it easier (EZier?) than ever for musicians to quickly create rhythm tracks that sound like they were played by a real drummer.

Rebuilt from the ground-up, EZdrummer 3 comes with a new, fully scalable and resizable interface and a new library of MIDI grooves. The Tap2Find feature now includes a step sequencer, and you can now mix and match elements of different grooves in an instant.

If you'd rather program your own grooves, there's now an onboard grid editor, while new humanisation features automatically adjust velocity and microtiming to create a more natural performance. Articulations are automatically varied, too.

The mixer has been redesigned to be more intuitive – you can now preview instruments and overhead channels from this window – and offers presets for multiple genres.

And then there's the Bandmate feature: give EZdrummer 3 an idea and it'll automatically create a custom groove.

Moving on to the new sound library, you now get seven kits and 'extras' that were captured by producer/engineer/mixer at Hansa Studios in Berlin. You also have a choice of three rooms, so you can adjust the ambience.

EZdrummer 3 – which runs on PC and Mac in VST/AU/AAX formats – will be released on 3 May priced at €165.

Anyone who buys EZdrummer 2 between now and then will get a free version 3 upgrade as soon as it becomes available. Existing users can pre-order the upgrade now for €72. FM

Sonicware's SmplTrek is a handheld pad sampler for self-contained production

Roland's SP-404 portable sampler sometimes feels like it sits in a product category all of its own, but it could soon be joined there by Sonicware's SmplTrek, a handheld sampler that's just debuted on Kickstarter.

This compact device promises one-touch sample recording; it comes with a built-in mic and inputs for dynamic mics, electric guitar/bass and line-level sources, and you can also sample from your smartphone over USB.

Sampled sounds can be auto-sliced and split across the bank of pads and timestretched and pitchshifted to match the tempo and key of your song. On the sequencing front, each of your projects can have 16 scenes, with each of these containing 10 sequencer tracks (these can handle loops, one-shots, drums, instruments and external MIDI). You also get three additional global audio tracks for recording the likes of vocals and guitar.

All parameter automation can be recorded and edited, and finished songs can be run through mastering effects and then exported to a single audio file. Hook up a USB cable to your phone or computer and you can also livestream your audio, adding your voice over the top.

SmplTrek comes with more than 500 sample-based sounds and more than 100 drum kits, and there are 30 effects, too. Samples are stored on SD card. You can currently put down a Super Early Bird pledge for SmplTrek – this costs ¥35,500 (around £222) or more. The funding target has already been reached, so backers should start receiving their units in September this year. FM

Waveform Pro 12 is "the most creative, inspirational and affordable DAW ever created"

We're used to DAW developers talking about releasing the 'biggest' update to their software in a while, but in the case of Tracktion's Waveform Pro, we're told that version 12 is the 'broadest' revision in a decade.

Presumably, this refers to the fact that improvements have been made right across the board: there's a new Smart Browser, more plugins and effects, a reworked audio engine, enhanced MIDI features, improved hardware controller support and more. The end result, we're assured, is "the most creative, inspirational and affordable DAW ever created".

The new browser has been designed to speed up your workflow, with fast access to key elements of Waveform 12, the option to colour-code favourites, and Smart Lists that can be used to preview and consolidate edit and project items.

There's also a new instrument – the sub-friendly BASSOSC – 15 revised audio effects, six utility plugins and the Dual Guitar IR, which can be used to emulate guitar and bass amp cabinets.

On the editing side, there are now MIDI Fold options and a new Event List Editor. Drum Grid Mode, meanwhile, is a beat-centric alternative to the piano roll, and includes randomisation options to humanise the likes of velocity, pitch, note start and note length. There are also Step Clips, which promise to breathe life into basic patterns, and MIDI Strum, which has been designed to add movement and realism.

The new audio engine, meanwhile, is said to dramatically improve CPU performance, enabling enhancements such as a silence removal tool – useful for podcasters and dialogue editors.

Find out more about Waveform Pro 12 on the Tracktion Software website. It's available now for PC, Mac and Linux (it even runs on Raspberry Pi) and costs $149. A 90-day free trial is also available. FM

ROLI returns with Seaboard RISE 2

If you thought that you'd seen the last of ROLI and its Seaboard range of controllers, think again, as we now have the prospect of the Seaboard Rise 2.

Launched in 2015, the Rise was a more affordable version of ROLI's full-size Seaboard MPE controller, but has been off the market for two years. The new version is said to be easier to play, more durable, and comes with a better software bundle.

The most significant improvement over the original Rise might well be the Keywave2 silicone playing surface, which provides 'frets' that enable players to more accurately judge the position of their fingers on each key. This new surface is said to make the Rise 2 more playable than its predecessor, and easier for players of standard keyboards to get to grips with.

Rise 2 also offers a new platinum blue anodised aluminium chassis, giving it a more contemporary look. Build quality is also said to have been improved, and you now get both standard MIDI and USB-C ports to ensure maximum compatibility with software and hardware instruments.

Features inherited from the original Rise include the Touch Fader controls, integrated battery and Bluetooth MIDI support for wireless operation. Rise 2 is bundled with the Equator2 synth, Ableton Live Lite, the ROLI Studio production suite and a new version of ROLI Dashboard, which features 5D visualisers for customising your settings.

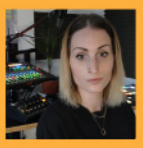
A limited number of Rise 2s are available for pre-order now from the ROLI website priced at $1,399. FM

Generate new musical ideas in Ableton Live

Use Live's Audio to MIDI conversion to creatively customise tonal characteristics and the sequence of an audio loop

Sometimes we find ourselves wanting to use an audio loop or phrase (let's take an example of some chords), but we maybe wish those chords would trigger a different sound or instrument, or we could change some of the sequence of the chords. Or maybe we have an idea of a melody that we can hum or sing, but aren't sure what notes we're actually singing and therefore unable to play these notes as MIDI. Live offers a range of conversion options for these occasions to help extract MIDI information out of audio material. In this example we're going to work with an audio loop of piano chords which we will convert to MIDI, then edit the notes and change the instrument that these chords will be playing.

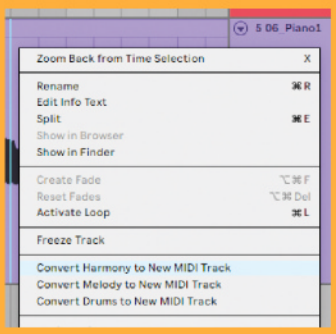
ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Anna Disclaim is a London-based audio engineer, producer, educator and Ableton Certified Trainer. She offers both classroom and individual tuition for all levels and abilities. To find out more, visit: **annadisclaim.com**

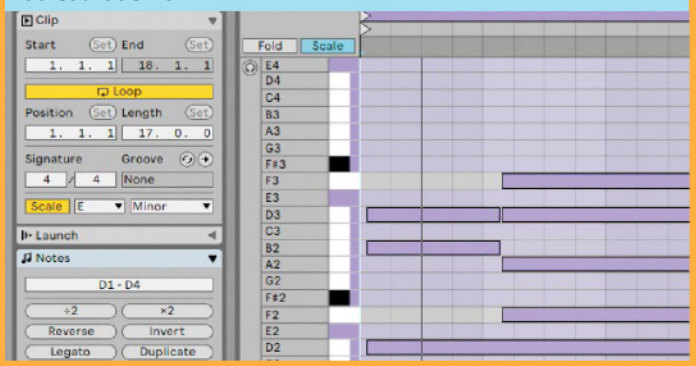
01

After importing an audio clip into Live, we'll right click/control click on the clip and choose Convert Harmony to New MIDI Track. We're using harmony conversion since the audio here consists of multiple notes played at once, therefore it's a polyphonic sound. Live creates a new MIDI track and inserts a default instrument on it resulting in a conversion, but we can change this to any instrument.



02

Click the MIDI clip to use the MIDI Editor. If you know the key of the original audio loop you can set the Scale Settings in Clip View to check that all converted MIDI notes are in the desired scale. Sometimes Live detects and extracts extra notes, but these could be easily edited out now.



03

You can also use MIDI effects such as Scale, to transpose the chords, or to keep control of random notes. The arpeggiator will also give a significant change by allowing further creative processing to the original sequence.

04

As the final step, we can go ahead and find a different instrument that we prefer for these chords to be playing or we can get creative and design our own sound for total control. In my example, I picked a fairly laidback synth lead sound where I adjusted the attack on the amplitude envelope attack to accommodate the arpeggiation better.

Tim Deluxe
The Radicle

Strictly Rhythm, 2015

As a DJ and producer he'd been turning out bangers, and turning up to play them, since the early '90s. His UK garage smash *RipGroove* catapulted him into the limelight. Then the club classic, *It Just Won't Do*, scored him summers' long residencies in Ibiza. But, the relentless treadmill of dance music had started to take its toll on Tim Deluxe.

"I hit a burnout," he says. "And I started to fall out of love with it all. I'd been at this non-stop since I left school, and it started to feel like I had nothing left to say."

Jaded and dejected, he decided to learn the piano in a bid to reconnect with music again at the simplest level. "That completely reinvigorated me, creatively," he says. "Getting back to basics and playing for the joy of it. That's what I needed. The whole DJing thing was such a hamster wheel."

Falling in love with jazz, soul, and classical again, he decided to make new music, touching on those styles, rather than the banging dance sound that was dominating the scene at the time.

"I just wanted to let it groove," he says. "To make it more human, with that looser style. This was at the height of EDM, which was as stiff as a board. I wanted to make an album based on the musicality and harmony of jazz, and the things that influenced me."

Through stars of the live circuit like Ben Hazleton, Tim recruited more players to form a crack team of musicians around him. "It was Ben on bass. Enzo Zirilli and Rod Youngs on drums. John Donaldson on organs. The legend Jim Mullen on guitar. And Jay Phelps and Pete Wareham brought the brass.

"I didn't want everything to be perfect on-the-beat. Before, I'd loop, repeat, and quantise. But, what you realise is, we're not computers, we're human. And in that 'search for perfection' we've completely imperfected music, on a mainstream level, because we have that power to fix and tune everything. This album was going against all of that."

Words by Roy Spencer

Track by track with Tim Deluxe

Tim Deluxe has lots of music in the pipeline, more focused around his deep love of jazz and classical, rather than dance, though. However, his seminal Double 99 garage monster, *RipGroove*, turns 25 this year. In its honour Tim is working on a celebratory remix of this bonafide club classic. "I've booked the sessions in and mocked up a whole string section that smashes it," he says. "It actually might be the last thing I do in dance music." You heard it here first.

JAS

"This felt like an opener. I started with these raw musical sketches, but they needed vocals. I didn't really want to go down the sort of top-line route and get singers in, so I just dug for acapellas and I came across this one from Barbara Ann Teer [*Black Theater*]. Mood II Swing had sampled it years ago. And Mark Farina used it in his DJ sets.

"It came from a recording that's a half hour sit-down interview, and I literally just sat there in my studio and played it from start to finish. I'd only ever heard little snippets, and I was like, 'Wow, this is amazing'.

"What she said resonated with what I was trying to say. The sentiment of it. I didn't want to be one dimensional. She was saying that for me. Then we jammed a sort of free jazz thing over it, like soundtracking movie dialogue."

Feelings

"This one has my friend Ben Onono doing an impression of Nina Simone on it. He's a diva *[laughs]* and Nina is his favourite musician.

"I actually got him to sing it in a different key and then pitch it down and stuff. So we had a little play around with techniques on that one just in order to get it to fit nicely. We got him to sing it in like a third or a major third, out-of-key completely. And then pitched him down into the key of E flat.

"Then the instrumental vibe on that was just based around the [Dave Brubeck] *Take Five* piano shuffle, and those piano chops. Then I got Jay [Phelps] and Pete [Wareham] to play beautiful horns on top in the studio."

Captain, Captain

"This was an exploration of fourths. I was just obsessed with those at that time on the piano. I wanted to do that with the synthesiser, like how the techno and electro guys would open up the filter to make it all blurred, and then bring it back into this super tight groove. That was my kind of jazz version – going full sustain pedal. But, on the piano, you know?

"That kind of technique, from the dance side of things, works so well when you're in a club. Taking out the kick and the bass, and everything just swelling open and then coming back in. It's always a real dancefloor moment. So, it's quite nice to do that acoustically, with real musicians.

"The vocal sample is from a guy talking about working on a paddle steamer in the Mississippi River, essentially just looking forward to payday. That just fitted really nicely on that track, too."

LOVE Is

"I heard the sample I used on this track on a tape, and we eventually cleared it [Fenton Robinson's *You Don't Know What Love Is*]. What's quite interesting about this is that it doesn't ever go to five chords. So, in the blues obviously, the five chords thing is a huge part of it. It was catching the players out. I remember Pete [Wareham] playing and then going to the five, and designing his line around that.

"We'd jam over mocked up demos. Just simple beats of the riffs, kind of rough. Especially for the horns, there was a lot of space left for them then to just play. I was a sponge for jazz chords and the stuff legends like Bill Evans played. I loved that, but I wasn't at the level to keep up with my musicians. But, I got the sketches out in my studio. It was a small room, so we went to [Grammy-winning producer] Fraser T Smith's to record properly. I'd done programming for a Leona Lewis record, and took studio time instead of payment."

"The other thing in that track is that Jay – who plays the muted horn that starts it off – didn't play that over that track. It was from another solo, from another tune we did. I literally just dragged it over, and didn't even change the BPM or anything. And it just started to work. I don't even think Jay knows that *[laughs]*.

"And then I put the organ on myself, when I got back to the studio. I was unsure about it. I thought John [Donaldson] could play it better. I sent it to him and he was like, 'sounds fine to me'. Yeah. It was that sort of imposter syndrome and self doubt and lack of confidence. But it worked out…"

Unsung Hero

"This has a Maya Angelou vocal on it. That had a real vibe to it. Then I asked Enzo [Zirilli] to add some drums and Ben [Hazleton] played bass, just really locking in on that super cool groove.

"Then I just mapped the chords and stuff, and then got John to just expand upon it on the organ. And then Jim [Mullen], legend that he is, did his guitar playing in one take. It was crazy. He just blew my head off. There's only two musicians I've ever worked with who could do that. Jim Mullen and Katherine Tinker, a classical pianist I work with now.

"It's a privilege to get to work with people like that because, up to that point, I'd become so disillusioned with making dance music."

Dah Dance

"This is like a weird hybrid and a musical mix of stuff. I wasn't really sure what I was trying to do or say on this track. But, I had *The Helicopter Tune* beat, you know the drum break famously used in drum & bass by Deep Blue. I thought it could use a reggae feel bassline. And I was like, 'Yeah, let me see if I can just mash up something here'. I didn't really know what I was doing.

"Also, what's interesting, talking about jazz as well, is when fusing that style across 4/4, you've got stuff

swinging in triplets. Then, if you take a riff, you have this really nice interplay of things coming around in a six-beat cycle over a 4/4, which is really nice.

"It obviously feels like it's slowing down because of the triplets, but it's not. The pulse is still there. That's something they don't explore enough in dance music. That was another way I was getting away from that EDM thing, you know?"

So What!

"Jim Mullen played amazingly on this Miles Davis cover. I had to do no edits. He literally just came in and played it through. He said, 'I'll be honest with you. I could probably play this all day and it wouldn't work out better than that'. That's the beauty of these players.

"I also just really wanted to emphasise that vibe of switching between programmed 4/4 kicks and the real live drum solos. That back and forth. In jazz they call it trading."

Tryin' To Find A Way

"This started from one chord. Which is like a rootless elevens voicing. I was really into that approach that jazz musicians like Bill Evans had. There's something about not playing the root on the chords. I've got this fetish about certain chord voicings that I love, and I'll try to trace them back through French impressionism and people like Ravel and Debussy. It was like an onion, just peeling it back to reveal more and more layers. You end up seeing where people were drawing inspiration from.

"I just kept playing that chord and thinking about vocals for this track, and I found another spoken word section from that half hour recording that leapt out. It was the writer Charlie L. Russell taking about coming to America and losing his identity and blackness in order to be accepted by white society. And also his own personal struggle he has within himself, I guess. This track was just more reflective and that little bit deeper."

> "THE RIFF IS JUST A LEFT HAND PIANO TRAINING EXERCISE. IT'S A CHEAP WAY OF SOUNDING 'JAZZ'"

Shanti

"This has that Indian influence. I just loved those Coltrane records where that style was explored. I've always been a fan, even on my first album I had a track called *Mundaya* that was a nod towards Indian music. I even went off and did a whole Indian jazz project for Tru Thoughts called Uniting Of Opposites.

"Shanti also felt like a great way to end the album, with John [Donaldson] doing those pentatonic sweeps at the end, so Coltrane. It just helped it end on this this whole message of just peace, really."

Spirals Pt 1+2

"This was a hidden track on the CD. The riff is just a left-hand piano training exercise. It's a cheap way of sounding 'jazz'.

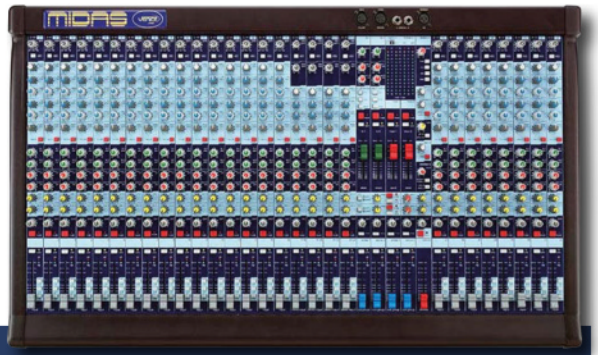
"Part 2 sort of goes into this kind of jazzy, mad, cosmic world. I recorded the musicians, going for it. You could't play Part 2 in the club – far too noodle-y *[laughs]*.

"They had a drum room at the main studio we were using in West London. And then they had another live room. And so we put Ben [Hazleton] in-between the two rooms, playing bass. He was sort of in the corridor *[laughs]*. And then John [Donaldson] was in the other room with the piano, and then Rod [Youngs] is playing drums in the drum room, just going for it. And it's kind of just everyone jamming out.

"And then I picked the best take of all that playing, and overdubbed some electronics. I jumped on the Moog and went for it with the Voyager. I did passes, which I didn't really do back then. And then just repeated it and repeated it, in a typical sort of house style. It came out great!" **FM**

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

To keep up with his The Other Cinema Mixcloud shows, or any breaking news on forthcoming music, hit up **twitter.com/TimDeluxe**



In the studio with Tim Deluxe

"My studio was at the Gin Factory, run by MJ Cole and his wife, on St. John Street, not far from where I lived in Clerkenwell. I had the basement studio and I sketched all the riffs that came out of my piano lessons there.

"I had all analogue. So, a Midas 320 Venice desk, a Moog, a Korg and a borrowed Rhodes.

"Then we took everything to my good friend Fraser T Smith's famous studio complex in West London. We laid down Rhodes, drums, bass guitar, and double bass. Then all the baritone and tenor sax, and trumpet.

"Everything went through my trusty Moogerfooger 104 effects unit, which I still have. It has this drive on it, and feedback, which was really nice. I would just be doing passes on that, over the top of tracks.

"I was using Cubase, and we then recorded on Pro Tools over at Fraser's. Everything went to two-inch tape – you know, proper old school. And then he had really beautiful mics and things like that."

LIKE IT? TRY THESE...

Tim Deluxe
The Little Ginger Club Kid

For his debut, he served up a stonking set of deep house grooves, including a future classic that would become his biggest hit.

ADD THESE TO YOUR PLAYLIST:
'It Just Won't Do', 'Mundaya (The Boy)', 'Less Talk More Action!'

St Germain
Tourist

Ludovic Navarre mixed up jazzy styles and electronica with a fancy French flair on this Blue Note millennial masterpiece.

ADD THESE TO YOUR PLAYLIST:
'Rose Rouge', 'Sure Thing', 'Montego Bay Spleen'

Nuyorican Soul
Nuyorican Soul

The Masters at Work joined the dots between Latin, soul, house, and hip-hop in '97. With an all-star cast, along for the ride.

ADD THESE TO YOUR PLAYLIST:
'I Am the Black Gold of the Sun', 'It's Alright, I Feel It!', 'Nautilus'

Lamb
Fear of Fours

By their second studio album, Andy Barlow and Lou Rhodes were also bored sick of dance music conventions (including the 4/4 beat referenced in the title).

ADD THESE TO YOUR PLAYLIST:
'"B Line', 'Soft Mistake', 'Bonfire'

Uniting Of Opposites
Ancient Lights

Indian/classical/drone/jazz fusion album from Tim, Clem Alford and Ben Hazleton, released on Brighton label, Tru Thoughts, in 2018.

ADD THESE TO YOUR PLAYLIST:
'Mints', 'Car Number 27 / Mr. Alpo', 'The Uniting Of Opposites'

HOPE AND HOMES FOR CHILDREN

URGENT APPEAL

Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine is not just a humanitarian crisis for the Ukrainian people; it's a child protection emergency.

Up to 100,000 children warehoused in Ukraine's vast orphanage system – a network of over 700 buildings – risk being forgotten. Left to face the dangers of war alone as staff flee. As families are torn apart or forced from their homes, many more children are at risk of being separated from the love and protection they desperately need. Worse still, they are at risk of trafficking, or being placed in overcrowded, understaffed and poorly resourced orphanages in border countries.

We must act now.

Born out of the Balkans conflict 30 years ago, we've championed the vital importance of family and community-based care of children and our teams are on the ground in Ukraine, Moldova and Romania to ensure this war does not rob children of the love and protection they need now more than ever. Across all three countries, we're directly supporting displaced families and unaccompanied children with material and emotional support. We're working closely with authorities to keep families together when they are at their most vulnerable and to fight for the safe tracking, monitoring and care for children without parental care. And we won't stop when the fighting stops.

Will you help us by donating?

With your help, we can avert a child protection crisis of epic proportions and ensure children are protected and kept in families. Never orphanages.

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Please quote **FP22 - Mus** when making your donation.

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Kikagaku Moyo
Kumoyo Island

Guruguru Brain

At the start of 2022, Japanese psych-rockers Kikagaku Moyo announced that they will be taking an 'indefinite hiatus' from releasing music and touring. For the last decade, the Tokyo 5-piece have pushed the envelope for psychedelic, alt-rock from Asia, with their own spun-out guitar-laden, cosmic albums, spellbinding live shows and their own DIY label that celebrates the continent's experimental music, Guruguru Brain. A collective that will be sorely missed, not just in Asia, but around the world, Kikagaku Moyo will go out with one final tour and album. Their fifth studio album in total, *Kumoyo Island* is a celebratory, euphoric mind-trip to Kikagaku Moyo's imagined island, traversing fuzzy guitars, mind-melting grooves, infections drums, deep, grumbling basslines, sweeping melodies and their ever-present swathes of psychedelia. Thick layers of fuzz are penetrated by swirling grooves and a rhythmical force that pulls everything into the centre of each track. The whole album bristles with energy, and a sense of exploration that has always made Kikagaku Moyo records stand out. But there is also a playful sense of fun, lifting the album out of heavy, psychedelic streams and into moments of Japanese folk music and Brazilian pop and it's these peaks and slopes that make *Kumoyo Island* such a fun landscape to explore. Another brilliant, unpredictable and kaleidoscopic album, *Kumoyo Island* is a stark reminder of what we will be missing. Let's just hope that 'indefinite hiatus' is not as indefinite as it sounds. ***Tom Jones***

ADD THESE TO YOUR PLAYLIST:

Effe, Cardboard Pile, Yayoi Iyayoi

9/10

ALBUM OF THE MONTH

Hari Sima
Solo en Occidente
Objetos Perdidos

Solo en Occidente is the beautifully introspective and reflective second album from Valencia artist, Paco León's experimental side-project, Hari Sima. Tapping into a soundscape that merges electronic and environmental sounds, *Solo en Occidente* takes us on a journey deep into the heart of dark, shadowy forests, heightening the sense of isolation, seclusion and uncertainness. There is plenty of tension throughout the record, conjuring a sense of being watched by something hidden high up in the trees, adding to the eerie sensation that persists throughout. Delving into a darker psyche than his previous experimental works have ventured into, *Solo en Occidente* is bristling with an intensity that borders on fear, without tipping over into it. Sweeping melodic sequences wash over intricate modular synth emissions, layers of fuzzy electronic and hypnotic percussion to create an atmosphere that feels mysterious, ancient and distinctive. An escape from the relentlessness of modern existence, *Solo en Occidente* is an immersive excursion into an imagined world that feels lost from time. ***Tom Jones***

ADD THESE TO YOUR PLAYLIST:

Sumatra, Petricor, Desarraigo

8/10

Amosphère
More Die of Heartbreak
33-33

More Die of Heartbreak is the beautiful, sensual and meditative debut album from the Chinese-born but Paris-based electronic composer and multi-disciplinary visual artist, Amosphère. Inspired by a combination of Tarkovsky's *Solaris* and traditional Chinese music, the record is an expansive, dream-like journey through ambient textures, experimental structures and minimal arrangements. Individual sounds are given space and resonate all the more, allowing the listener to sink into Amosphère's engrossing world. Despite its minimal aesthetic, *More Die of Heartbreak* is full of warmth and light, with muted melodies and warm, stretched out synths creating a soundscape that is as inviting as it is unfamiliar. There is a grainy, raw authenticity that feels present throughout the entire record, perfectly capturing Amosphère's analogue craft and also allowing the album to evolve with an organic and easy-flowing nature. A brilliant debut from an artist with a bright future, *More Die of Heartbreak* welcomes you into the world of the subconscious. ***Tom Jones***

ADD THESE TO YOUR PLAYLIST:

Circuit of Uncounciousness, 0229 pm, Celestial

8/10

RECOMMENDED

Gene On Earth
Time On The Vine
Limousine Dream

Enigmatic Californian-born producer, Gene On Earth is something of a mystery. Emerging seemingly from the shadows with his debut album, *Local Fuzz*, in 2019, he instantly won widespread acclaim. Yet the producer is more associated with the moustachioed, cigarette smoking character that adorns his work than anything else. His debut album was followed by a string of impressive EPs on his own Limousine Dream imprint, only ratcheting interest in his brand of club-ready, electronic music. His second album, the brilliant *Time On The Vine*, Gene has shifted his aesthetic somewhat. Moving away slightly from the dancefloor energy of *Local Fuzz, Time On The Vine* is a more spaced out, trippy and melodic affair. The album starts with a slowed-down, but seriously groovy house jam, signalling this shift in tone before later venturing into pure ambient and experimental stylings, summer grooves and even some downtempo. Interspersed with some more driving tracks that we might expect from Gene, the faster, dubbier cuts on the record tap into a wonky, vibe, with addictive minimal rhythms and fuzzy electronics taking us into an almost cosmic, computer game realm. Full of laid-back fun and warmth, it perfectly encapsulates Gene On Earth's innate understanding of underground and his ability to move beyond it. ***Tom Jones***

ADD THESE TO YOUR PLAYLIST:

Snooze Operator, Time Optimist, Chuggy Elements

9/10

THE AMBIENT ISSUE

What exactly is ambient music? That's not such a simple question to answer. While the genre of 'ambient' is fairly well established, the exact rules of what makes something ambient aren't rigidly defined.

The basic, sometimes derogatory definition is that ambient is background music. That's certainly true of some ambient music. Many of Brian Eno's early works, for example, were specifically created to blend in with the listener's environment, more like a background texture than an up-front performance. Ambient music can be equally intense and all encompassing though – providing a sort of sensory overload that locks the listener into its world rather than drifting along in the background. You could say it's generally beatless – especially in an electronic context – but this definition excludes rhythmic ambient tracks from the likes of Aphex Twin, and the seemingly contradictory realm of ambient techno. It's tough to define by any one specific set of creative tools too, as the genre can take the form of everything from classical compositions to sample collages or self-creating modular synthesis. The most accurate description probably comes down to the general approach; one that places texture and atmosphere above traditional musical structures. This issue, we're exploring ambient music from a – mostly – electronic perspective. Whether you want to create your next freeform opus, or simply add a touch of ambient magic to a track, over the next pages we'll guide you through a few tools, ideas and approaches to get the ambient ideas flowing.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF AMBIENT MUSIC

From ’50s classical experiments to an antidote to ’90s raves, ‘ambient’ music has proved to be less of a single genre, more of a creative ethos

Though the term wasn’t coined until the early ’70s, the creative approach and musical philosophy behind ambient music had been percolating in the creative minds of various composers and artists throughout the 20th century. The first inkling appeared as early as the 1920s in the works of impressionist composer Erik Satie, who applied the term “musique d’ameublement”, or furniture music, to a number of simple, unstructured and repetitive pieces intended to be performed as background music while relaxing or dining, not listened to directly.

Though not widely performed during Satie’s lifetime, these pieces would go on to be championed by another proto-ambient pioneer, John Cage. Cage, of course, is responsible for *4’33”*, the 1952 musical work that consisted of 4 minutes and 33 seconds of silence. By asking the performer to be silent, Cage was asking the audience to redirect their attention to the naturally occurring sounds around them, taking Satie’s idea one step further and clearing a path for ambient music’s emphasis on space and atmosphere.

While Cage was laying essential groundwork for the development of ambient music in the US, composer and musicologist Pierre Schaeffer was spearheading the avant-garde practice of musique concrète over in France. Rooted in what were essentially the first experiments with sampling, musique concrète treated recorded sounds as a compositional resource to be manipulated and processed. Like Cage, Schaeffer radically reoriented our expectations of what music could be, opening the doors for ambient musicians working decades later to integrate field recordings and environmental sounds into their work, abandoning structure and rhythm in favour of tone, mood and texture.

© AP/Gamma-Rapho via Getty Images

Impressionist composer Erik Satie, applied the term “musique d’ameublement” to unstructured, repetitive pieces intended as background music

GETTING THE CRITICS HEADSCRATCHING

A decade later in the ’60s, minimalism began to take shape, as composers like Steve Reich, La Monte Young and Terry Riley experimented with deceptively simple, highly repetitive arrangements built from long, extended chords, steady rhythms and layered textures. Baffling many critics of the era, minimalism was incredibly influential: not only did its hypnotic repetition go on to inspire techno and house in the ’80s, it also paved the way for ambient musicians to renounce convention and produce lengthy works that lacked structure, direction, and the kind of harmonic resolution listeners previously expected.

It wasn’t until the late 1970s that the term “ambient music” appeared. Brian Eno coined the phrase, and is regularly credited with inventing the genre, though he couldn’t have done so without building on the advancements of hundreds of pioneering artists similar to the ones mentioned above. The story goes that a friend of Eno’s brought him an album of 18th-century harp music to listen to while he was bedridden after a car accident. As she was leaving, she put the record on for him to listen to, but left the volume almost too low for him to hear. Unable to get out of bed and turn it up, Eno was left to

18+

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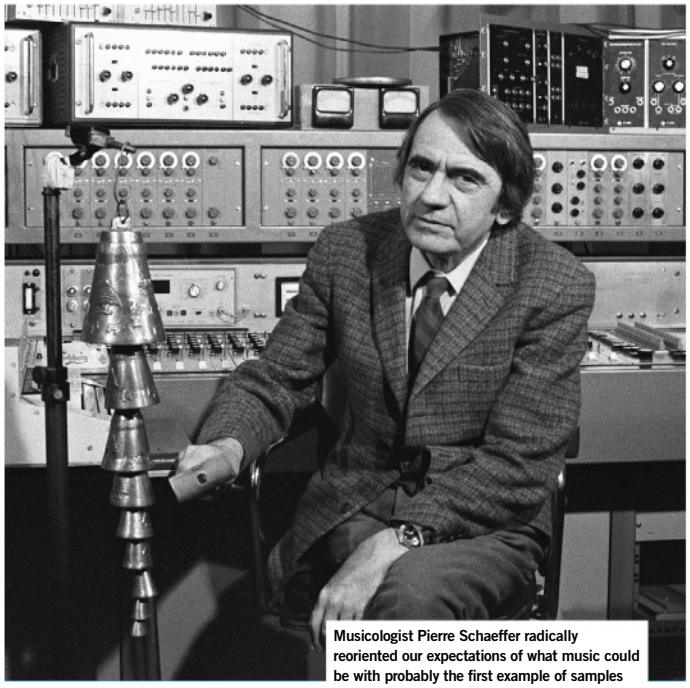

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Musicologist Pierre Schaeffer radically reoriented our expectations of what music could be with probably the first example of samples

focus on the barely audible music, which was just loud enough to hear above the rain outside. He's claimed that this experience taught him a "new way of hearing music, as part of the ambience of the environment."

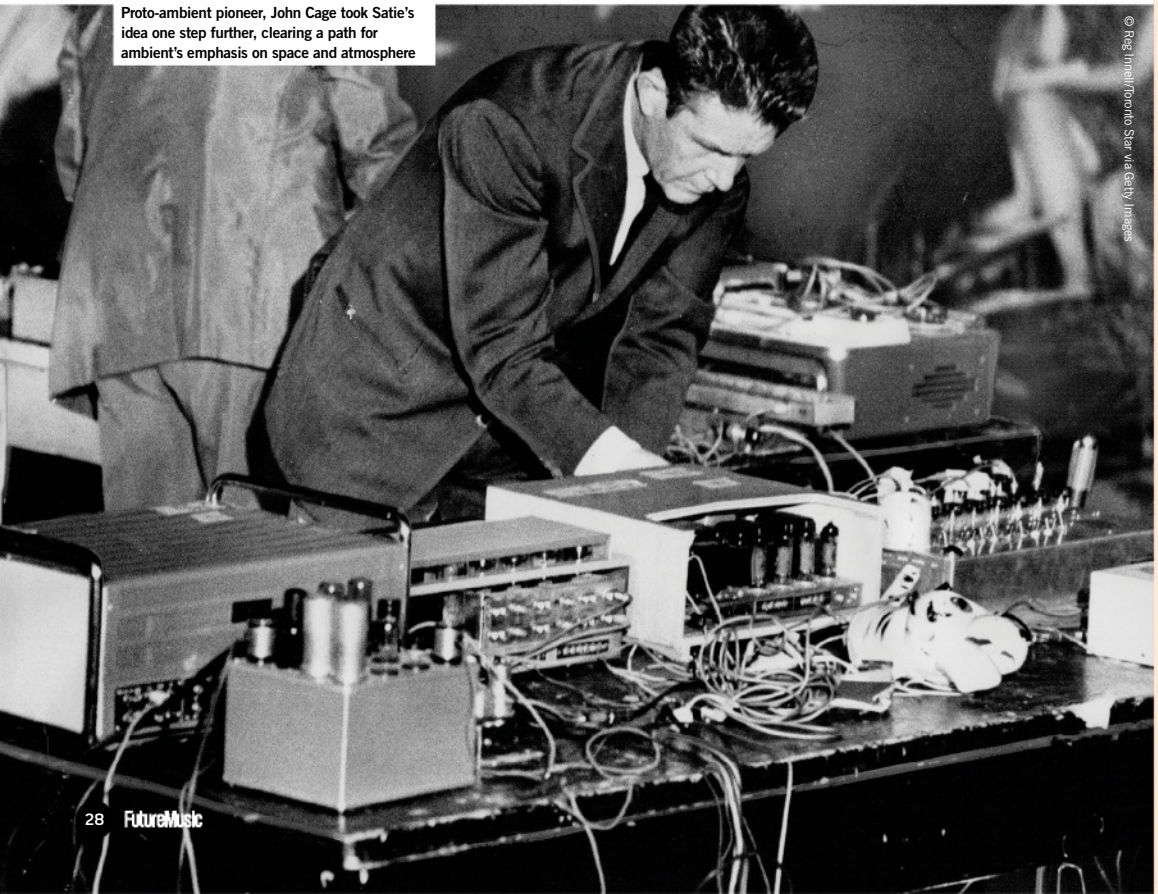
Though Eno's first ambient release came with 1975's *Discreet Music*, it was the series of four albums named after the genre that he released throughout the late '70s that helped to popularise and solidify the term as a genre and a style. It was in the liner notes for the first of these that Eno most explicitly defined ambient music, claiming that the genre should enhance the "acoustic and atmospheric idiosyncrasies" of the listener's environment, inducing "calm and a space to think, [...] accommodating many levels of listening attention without enforcing one in particular", and, most famously, that it should be "as ignorable as it is interesting." And thus, ambient music was born.

DEMOCRATISING THE TOOLS AT PLAY

Eno's bright idea came at an opportune moment. Music tech was beginning to develop exponentially, and in the '80s the first mass-produced synths were released and MIDI was introduced. The audio effects that characterise so much ambient music – reverb and delay – became more widely available through the development of digital pedals and affordable effects units.

As music technology became accessible to all those with a computer in the '90s, the experimentation continued, and offshoots and subgenres swiftly began to spring up – drone, chillout, downtempo, new age – while producers inspired by the ambient approach (Aphex Twin, anyone?) would go on to merge the genre with new sounds to create variants like ambient techno and ambient house.

The availability of these technologies, combined with the pioneering work of Eno and his predecessors, set the stage for ambient musicians throughout that decade and beyond to transform the genre into what it is today.



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Proto-ambient pioneer, John Cage took Satie's idea one step further, clearing a path for ambient's emphasis on space and atmosphere

5 ALBUMS YOU NEED TO KNOW

BRIAN ENO
AMBIENT 1: MUSIC FOR AIRPORTS (1978)

The first in Brian Eno's *Ambient* series, this was the first album ever to be categorised under the term. Across four drifting and unstructured pieces, Eno comforts nervous flyers by manipulating tape loops of piano, synth and vocals to soporific effect.

MIDORI TAKADA
THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS (1983)

Influenced by African drumming, gamelan and minimalist composers across the Atlantic, Japanese composer Midori Takada used a diverse range of live percussion and acoustic instrumentation to create a mesmerising masterpiece that was lightyears ahead of its time.

APHEX TWIN
SELECTED AMBIENT WORKS VOLUME II (1994)

On this album's predecessor, *SAW 85-92*, RDJ perfected ambient techno. The second time around, he ditched the beats altogether and produced some of the strangest and most powerful ambient music that's ever been recorded.

WILLIAM BASINKSI
THE DISINTEGRATION LOOPS (2002)

On the morning of September 11, 2001, William Basinski finished working on an ambient project based around the sounds of decaying tape loops. After witnessing the attack from his NYC rooftop that day, he dedicated this harrowing and majestic work to the victims of the tragedy.

JULIANNA BARWICK
THE MAGIC PLACE (2011)

Julianna Barwick used nothing but her voice and a smattering of synths to produce her sublime debut album. Looping, layering and processing and her heavenly vocals, she elicits a bewitching sense of wide-eyed wonder.

Ambient music is often underpinned by a drone-like texture. For this to really work and keep our interest it needs to evolve and develop over time. There are various techniques we can use to achieve this, and layering sounds either within a synth or by using multiple synths helps create the sonic interest we want. Here we're going to do a bit of both, creating our core sound using layers within one synth, Dune 3, which includes analogue-style oscillators and wavetable synthesis. Then we'll add some sequenced sounds on top using a second synth, Dmitry Sches Thorn.

6 GREAT SYNTHS FOR AMBIENT

Most soft synths deliver a decent pad sound but, for ambient sounds, wavetable synths also give you a way to create sonic interest by morphing through the table over time, making them great for evolving sounds. Combining different synthesis types helps create more unique textures

Capable of some beautifully rich sounds, in part due to its lovely unison/voice section and filters, Dune 3 is also supremely easy to program. With a powerful modulation matrix and effects section, we've also used it in our drone programming walkthrough.

This flagship synth combines DSP and sample-based sound generation, bundles it with a massive sample and patch library, then allows you to control it, should you wish, from over 65 well known hardware synths. There really is nothing else quite like it.

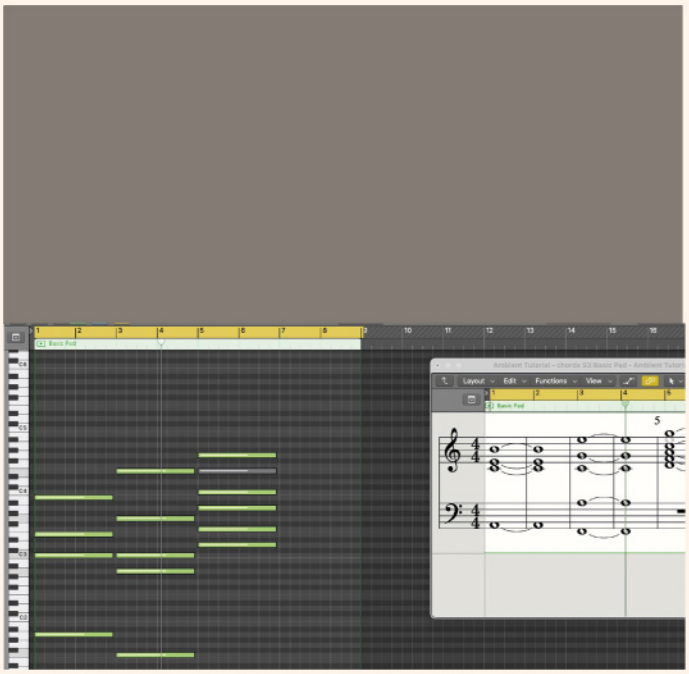
Without a doubt a bit of a leftfield synth, Iris 2 is a sample-based design that lets you use specific frequency regions in a source sample. It achieves sounds you'll struggle to create elsewhere, and is an education in the power of software synth design.

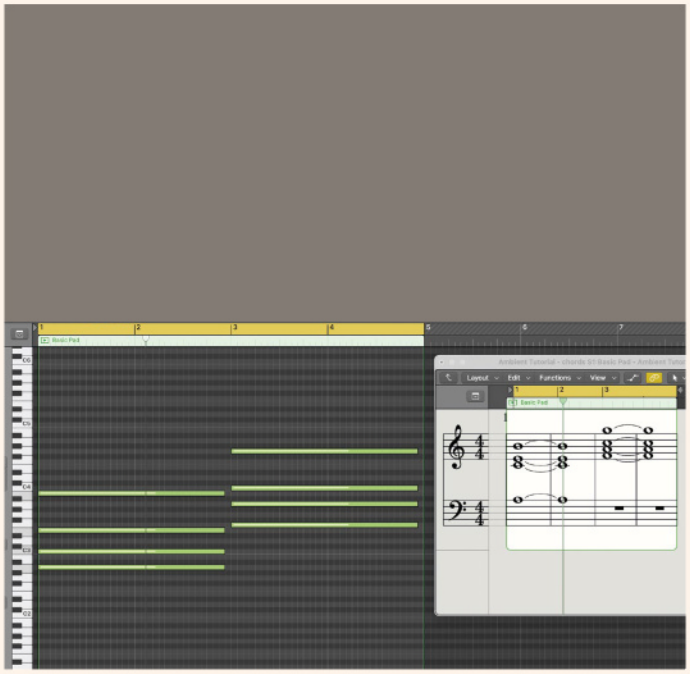
With its eight linked but individual modules, Oberheim's 8 Voice is a unique and rare synth that's been faithfully recreated by G Force Software. It's certainly not a do-it-all instrument, but it makes rich, evolving textures like no other synth we know.

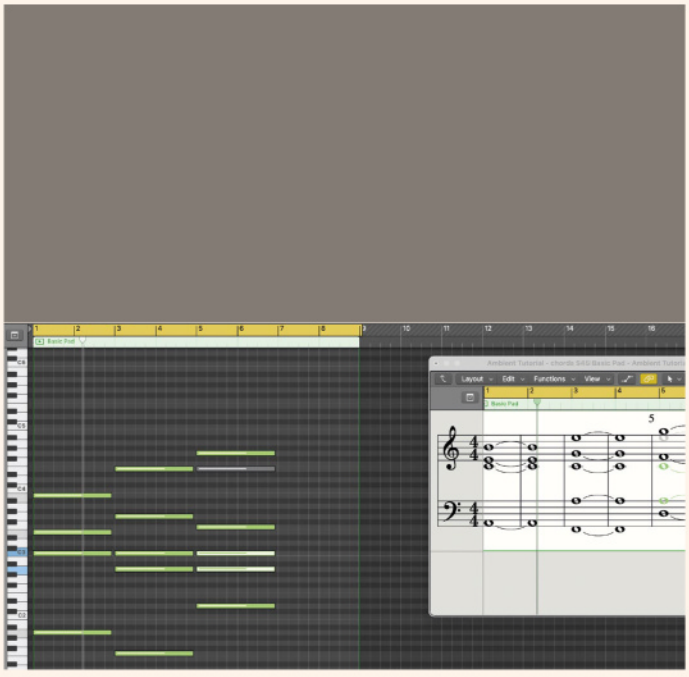
We love the simple user interface and sound of this long-running soft synth. But what really hooks us is the breadth of its patch library. Whatever sound you're after you'll find multiple examples as standard and in the many pay-for expansions.

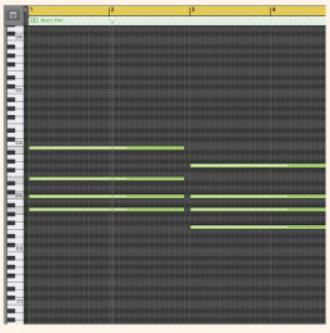
Korg's software version of its classic wavetable synth makes pad creation a joy. OK, there are probably more powerful wavetable style synths out there (Serum, Massive X and so on), but with all the original patches, it's ideal for that retro ambient vibe.

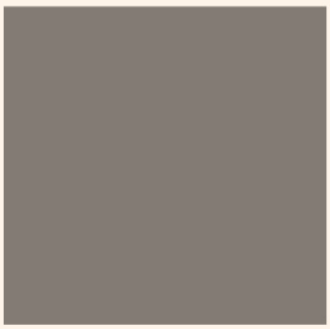
When creating a drone sound we often play a single note. This allows us to focus on the specifics of that evolving sound. Here we're going to move away from the drone effect and introduce some harmonic interest whilst maintaining the ambient feel. We do this by some nifty use of extended chords and also by avoiding chords that want to resolve (a dominant 7th for example), thus creating a sense of continuity. We'll start with just a couple of chords and then move onto a four-chord cycle, looking at how best to move from one chord to the next.

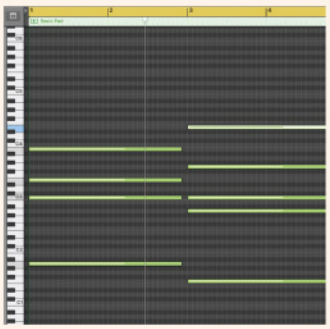


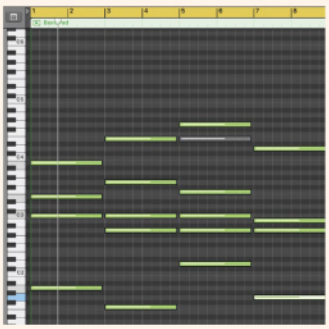


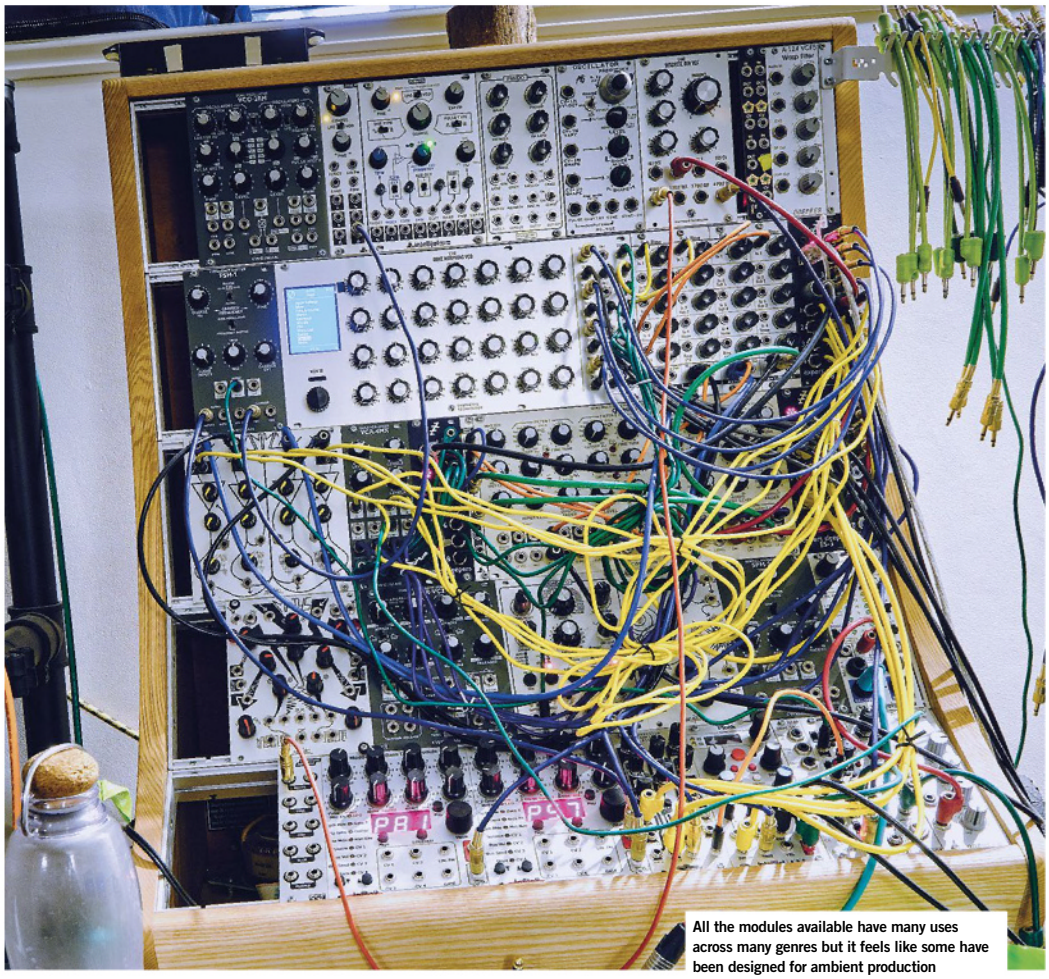












All the modules available have many uses across many genres but it feels like some have been designed for ambient production

USING MODULAR SYNTHS TO CREATE AMBIENT MUSIC

A true sound designer's dream, modular synths are the perfect tool for ambient on several fronts…

Modular synths are good for many genres of music but possibly none more so than ambient. The nature of modular means there are vast swathes of tools and options for creating everything from subtle evolving soundscapes and drones, to generative melodies. There are sequencers that can be used to build evolving pitched patterns, sound sources for every timbre imaginable and all the utilities to control everything. A lot of ambient music has subtler elements such as drones that can shift and warp over time and for these things, modular really is the best tool, as using modulation sources to control VCAs allows you to set up a near limitless piece of music. Lay melodic lines over this with a more standard sequence but even then they have the ability to adapt the output of pitches and triggers to generate complex and shifting lines. Modular is the way forward for all this and more.

Of course, most modules out there have many uses across many genres, but it feels like some have been designed for ambient production. The surge of granular modules over the last few years has helped ambient artists in the search for new textures, their popularity bringing new artists into this wonderful area of sound design. That sense of adventure is the key. More than any other genre, ambient is a place where sound designers can flourish, scratching that creative itch in exciting new ways.

IDEAS THAT HOLD FOR LENGTHIER PERIODS

Ambient music tends to run for longer and, while there is rarely a hook, generally doesn't remain static. Modular is perfect here too. As mentioned, there are often slow and subtle evolutions to the music, which might be very difficult to do using a traditional synth. Texture is key here, with that evolution maintaining interest. Many modules allow for this in one way or another. Washes of varying timbre can be achieved using modules like Mutable's Tides, or simple LFO chains via a module like Maestro, that can be chained for controlled diversity over time.

AN EMPHASIS ON TEXTURED RHYTHM

Then there's rhythm and beats. Ambient doesn't have to mean a lack of percussive elements, although there will rarely be any four to the floor in this arena. Look more to euclidean rhythms or other random but timed triggers, again whatever breaks from the norm. Percussive voices are often not the standard 808s/909s heard elsewhere, although they do pop up. Instead you can try samples of found sounds with a wider spread across the soundstage. Sample players are a great tool for introducing non-standard percussive hits: 1010 Music's Bitbox, with its 16 samples at a time, is a good example of CV controllable sample playback. Modules like Akemie's Taiko are more akin to a typical drum voice but have lots of headroom for creating interesting, usable sounds, plus CV controls to humanise hits.

Reverb is often a huge element of ambient but, as with other areas of the genre, modular offers reverbs of all styles to suit all tastes. You can go from huge, lush shimmers to tape delays or even connect a tank for authentic spring reverbs.

SOUND DESIGN IN THE DRIVING SEAT

While the voices and trigger methods may be the showstoppers, what makes modular so perfect for ambient is all the control on tap. Logic modules, sequential switches, matrix mixers, triggers and a slew of other options make modular a sound designer's dream and sound design is a huge part of the attraction of ambient music. All in all, modular, especially Eurorack, could be the perfect playground for the ambient artist seeking new ideas.

6 GREAT MODULES FOR AMBIENT

What do you look for when seeking modules to harness ambient textures and sounds? As noted below, capacity for generative creation, plentiful reverb and granular options are just some of the multifaceted factors to bear in mind, but the modular world really is your oyster…

The SWN has a lot to offer the ambient artist, with a huge range of timbres on offer, built-in LFOs to control pitch changes, scan through wavetables and more. Great for generative melodies.

Of all the notable granular modules on the market, ADDAC's 112 takes the crown. It's a large module but has so much to offer, from its ability as a looper and granular synth to its huge amounts of control both on-board and CV and the separate patch bay.

Having two filters in an ambient rig can be really useful and Erica's dual VCF is a good option, as it offers low-pass, band-pass and high-pass. Both filters can be linked and there is a summed output, alongside buckets of CV control with attenuverters for each.

Another option for generating pitches and triggers, Metropolix' two channels have many options for generative work and jamming. A highlight is the accumulator that allows each sum of the sequencer to adapt the pattern in a really musical way.

Marbles can be the beating heart of an ambient rig. It's perfect for generating controllably random triggers and pitches, with the ability to define scales, options for timing variations and repeatable patterns via the wonderful deja vu controls.

Ambient benefits from huge reverbs and delays and no module does this like Starlab. With reverb types, shimmer and lots of CV for integration, there's a lot to love. A Karplus feature adds to its versatility, along with great delay and an on-board LFO and filter.

AMBIENT COMPOSITION: TWO ARTISTS SHARE THEIR ESSENTIAL ADVICE

Boundary-pushing artists **Michael Scott Dawson** and **Claire Rousay** break down the approaches behind their distinct takes on ambient music

Michael Scott Dawson and Claire Rousay both have distinctive approaches to producing free-form and highly expressive ambient music. Using tape loops and processed guitar, Dawson's ***Music For Listening*** uses elements of chance and improvisation to create flowing and meditative pieces. Rousay's new record, ***everything perfect is already here***, layers a variety of sound sources over carefully curated field recordings, resulting in something that's at once highly personal and intriguingly abstract. We asked both composers to give us an insight into their own creative process and offer some advice to those seeking to find their own voice in ambient music.

MICHAEL SCOTT DAWSON

GIVE YOURSELF THE FREEDOM TO EXPERIMENT

"There's an inevitable debate that often comes up alongside the mere mention of ambient, about whether some processes hold more artistic value than others. If you Google ambient production advice, you often find remarks by some wise-ass or other snarking that all you need to do is put a ton of reverb and delay on your guitar.

"While I suppose that may be accurate advice in some capacity, it's frustratingly reductive to both the curious musician wanting to explore the genre and to the genre itself. Whether you are interested in composing stark, minimalist works or in creating a glimmering wall of sound, I encourage you to take time to explore and find sounds that resonate with you. Be OK with creating a lot of garbage in the process. One of the most fundamental things we should do as humans is encourage and support others in their creativity. "

> "DON'T ALLOW YOURSELF TO GET HUNG UP ON ALL OF THE EQUIPMENT YOU WISH YOU HAD"

© EmmaRuthnum

Dawson's *Music For Listening* uses elements of chance and improvisation to create flowing and meditative pieces

EMBRACE WHATEVER YOU HAVE TO WORK WITH.

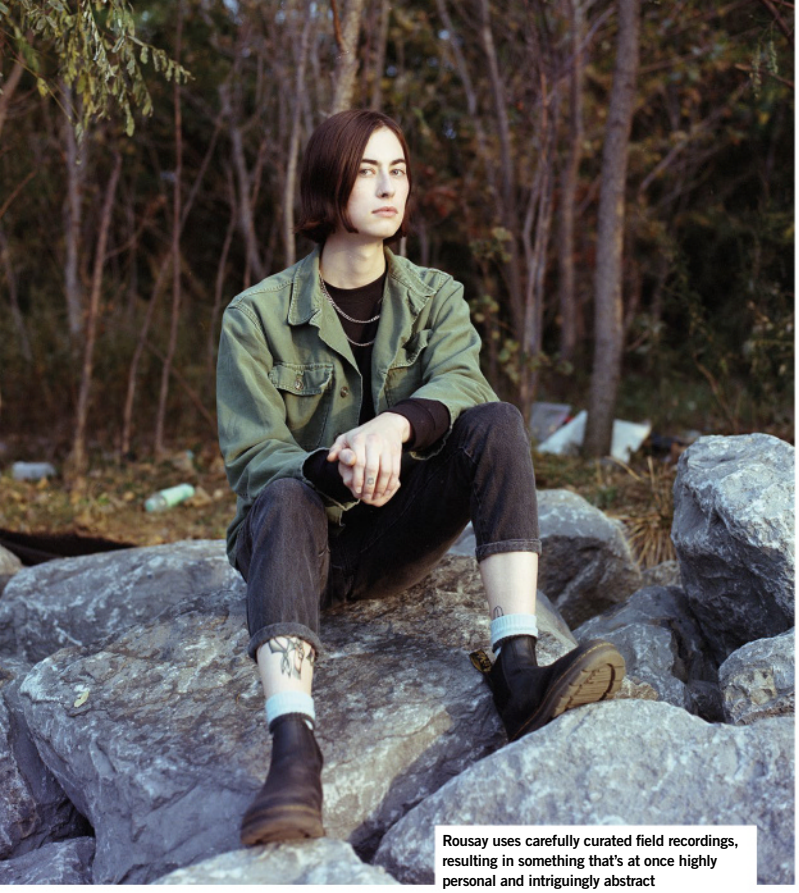
"Don't allow yourself to get hung up on all of the equipment you wish you had. Ambient music is closely tethered to technology, from recording software to the constant release stream of boutique pedals or the steady evolution of mind-bending modules for modular synths, but it's certainly not imperative to have the latest of everything to create something meaningful.

"At the heart of it a piano is a piece of technology. We now take for granted what it was intended to do, but that doesn't mean there aren't still endless possibilities of things it could do. I'm fairly confident that with enough tinkering and heart you could create a truly beautiful record with just your phone and the sound of your neighbour's wind chimes."

TRY DIFFERENT QUALITIES OF FIDELITY.

"Try different ways to juxtapose these elements. I suppose it's like when you see a photo of a Kardashian wearing a thousand dollar pair of shoes with a Slayer tee shirt. If you're creating entirely within a digital workspace then explore ways to generate a variety of sonic qualities. Try EQing a synth pad down to just a frail, high sizzle or using tape emulator plugins to saturate or warble tracks. If you're working with analogue instrumentation or a hybrid, then try recording with whatever you can get your hands on from cassette recorders to answering machines.

"I'm always interested in



© Felix Walworth

Rousay uses carefully curated field recordings, resulting in something that's at once highly personal and intriguingly abstract

exploiting (or celebrating) the flaws and shortcomings of older technologies. Dig out an old VCR from the basement and record audio over that dusty VHS tape of ***Friends*** episodes you've been saving for some reason. On my record I'd made voice notes on my phone of acoustic guitar ideas that I liked, but in the end there was quality to those recordings that I preferred over my efforts to mic the guitar properly so that was what I ended up using in the mixes."

LET SOME THINGS LIVE ON THE FRINGES

"Whether you're working with a soft synth or running a guitar through a stereo reverb, the default is going to be a hard pan in both speakers. Although that will sound big and spacious, try pulling them in slightly and leave some space on the very outskirts of your mix for textural elements or sounds that drift in and out of your track. Having those bits sit all the way L or R is really going to create a feeling for listeners that things grow wider and/or slightly expand and contract.

"Speaking of stereo tracks, explore the stereo field and search for balance. Recording everything in full stereo will sound awesome until it doesn't… Once you give yourself a little distance (literal and figurative) from your mix you will likely find that you have a cloudy mess. Keep some tracks in mono and find a nice place for them to live in one speaker or the other. It will provide much more clarity and depth. I also like to automate some panning on one or two subtle elements to have them weave side to side between other sounds and create a sense of movement in headphones."

> "IF I FEEL LIKE A TRACK ISN'T FINISHED BUT HAS STARTED TO SOUND BAD, I JUST SHELVE IT"

TAKE TIME TO LISTEN OUT IN THE WORLD

"I find environmental sounds to not only be a constant source of inspiration, but they directly influence my palette of tones and textures. Consider the way that pleasing sounds cut through the world, whether that's the percussive rumble of a distant train passing or the hushed rhythm of a broom sweeping across a sidewalk. How could you create similar sounds within your own tracks?

"Consider also integrating field recordings into music. When I made my first record I had completed all of the instrumentation and found myself noticing environmental sounds that I thought would feel at home in the songs so I was capturing field recordings after the fact. With my new record, it started with field recording and the musical elements were subsequently created and arranged around them."

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

Michael Scott Dawson's new album, *Music For Listening*, is out now on We Are Busy Bodies

CLAIRE ROUSAY

HOW I START A TRACK…

"When starting a new project, I typically assign myself parameters to work inside of. I will choose an approximate duration, key, as well as an emotion that I want the track to exist within. Sometimes over the course of recording these parameters change. Regardless, I do prefer to start with some basic guidelines. Once these parameters are set up, I decide on a field recording or sample that captures the emotion I am trying to convey. Once this has been selected, the rest of the composition/production seems to flow with much more ease than it would without these parameters."

HOW I KNOW WHEN A TRACK'S FINISHED

"I stop working on something once it starts to sound bad to me. If I feel like a track isn't finished but has started to sound bad, I just shelve it until I feel like working on it again. So many people stress about making the perfect record or 'everything having its place' in the music. I don't think that way. My recorded work tends to be lo-fi, partially free-form, and prioritises conveying emotion over sonic perfection. I decide things are finished when listening back to the recording moves me in some emotional way."

HOW TO MAINTAIN MOMENTUM IN LONGER PIECES…

"Whenever I'm working on longer pieces, I try to centre the track around a single theme. This theme can be some sort of musical motif or an abstract emotion or feeling I want to convey. Working on longer pieces of music is easier for me when I have a single melody or theme. This way I have something to properly measure each contribution against. Everything in the track then relates back to a single idea."

HOW I APPROACH ARRANGEMENT…

"Many of the choices I make regarding structure and arrangement come from the parameters I decide upon before starting the track. I feel most comfortable making a list of possibilities for arrangement, recording style, and format for public release before starting on any project. Much of my work is the result of remixing old recordings as well as creating collage-like pieces of music using a variety of sonic sources. This running list serves a database-like role during the process of working on a piece of music. I can constantly add or subtract from this list just like one can do in a DAW."

HOW I TACKLE WRITER'S BLOCK

"I actively try to avoid writer's block by following a daily recording routine during the times I'm not travelling. I try to record something new every single day, usually before 12:00pm. This could be anything (a field recording outside my house, a demo idea for a longer track, a short piece of electronic music, etc). 90% of these recordings never leave my hard drive. This sits well with me because it's the daily ritual of creating something new that I am chasing after all."

HOW I COMMUNICATE MY IDEAS…

"I have certain techniques that help me communicate my ideas better than other techniques. I do not place a huge importance on having my own sound and definitely do not believe in having a singular sound. I believe identifying too closely with a specific sound or style can be dangerous to the creative process. Some of the techniques or sounds I enjoy communicating with include voice to text, Auto-tune, field recordings with minimal activity, and multi-tracked/layered piano." FM

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

Claire Rousay's new album, *everything perfect is already here*, is out now

© Richard Ecclestone

NIK COLK VOID

Known for her improvised approach to modular systems, voice and guitar, Nik Colk Void talks to **Danny Turner** about her long-awaited debut album

After fronting the indie-rock band KaitO in her formative years, an unfulfilled Nik Colk Void returned to the world of visual arts before deconstructing her approach to studio and live performance and joining post-industrial duo Factory Floor. While performing on-stage in 2011, Void was spotted by former Throbbing Gristle members Chris Carter and Cosey Fanni Tutti, resulting in an invitation to play live and record with the duo under the pseudonym Carter Tutti Void.

Despite recording three albums as CTV and nine in total with various other collaborators, Void remained reticent to create solo work until convinced by the late Editions Mego founder Peter Rehberg. Void therefore set about reformulating her live and studio-based modular synth patches as a basis for the creation of her debut LP *Bucked Up Space* – a fearlessly unsettling album that encourages the listener to absorb its visceral tones and textures in their rawest form.

"WHEN YOU WORK WITH OTHER PEOPLE IT'S EASY TO PLAY IT SAFE, SO HAVING A BREAK ALLOWED ME THE SPACE TO FORGET WHAT I'D LEARNED"

Did you have reservations about coming into an industrial scene that's always had a very niche audience?

"I'm a fan of sound in general and more attracted to the tonality, textures and attitude of industrial music. I grew up in the middle of nowhere and once I could travel to London and hear music at massively loud volumes that had more of an impact on me than vocals and lyrics. My career has also been determined by the type of tools I use. With the guitar, I lost interest in making riff music and preferred to hit it with drum sticks or use extended techniques to create peculiar, resonating feedback. With industrial and electronic music, it's more about the impact of the sound and how it resonates in physical form."

Having said that, you were part of an indie punk band called KaitO, which does indicate you explored the singer/songwriter route?

"Dammit, how did you find that out *[laughs]*? I never thought I'd get anywhere playing music or art and fell into the band idea because it was a vehicle to get myself out and about travelling. Music used to be a massive part of my social environment, so I started the band and we got picked up by a Californian label called Devil in the Woods who invited us to go over and tour. It was an incredible time, but I was just going along for the ride to be honest."

Were you making music independently to that?

"I just craved being around other creative people, but everything has its time and after six years I moved to London and ended up working as a sculpture technician. Guitar music was no longer for me and I didn't like the attention of fronting a band. It wasn't until I saw Gabriel Gurnsey and Dominic Butler of Factory Floor playing live in East London that I fell back into music again."

For you, the guitar had become a symbolic instrument. How did you attempt to readapt your use of it?

"When you work with other people it's easy to play it safe, so having a break allowed me the space to forget what I'd learned and approach guitar playing from a different angle. I decided that if I wanted to go back into music I'd do it my way and everything became about how I could use a sound and play it in on my terms as opposed to how I'd been taught. Putting the guitar on a table rather than holding it made a big difference in terms of having a new point of entry to the instrument."

Did working with Factory Floor open you up to electronic music and the possibilities inherent in that realm?

"Not really, Paul Smith of Blast First records was my mentor on that front. Factory Floor was a meeting of minds. We weren't just using guitar pedals but guitar sequencers and small hand synths and adapting them to give us original sounds straight off the bat. Once again I found myself falling into the lead vocalist space, which I wasn't really into, so I re-evaluated my approach to vocals too. We manipulated noise and vocals and turned them into heavily processed samples, concentrating more on sound rather than the constructed tracks that Dom and Gabe had been playing."

You seem to want to distance yourself from having a persona. Does that play out in your music?

"I gave up thinking about how I fit into the industry quite a long time ago and I've always worked in visual arts so there's been a running theme throughout my career based on a play on words. The starting point is usually a terminology, like the album title *Bucked Up Space*, and I move on from there. Together, it all feels like one form, but I also have a natural inquisitiveness about sound. It's all about pushing the instruments to see how far I can take them, which is why being introduced to modular synthesis has been such a great experience."

How did your collaboration with ex-Throbbing Gristle members Chris Carter and Cosey Fanni Tutti manifest?

"Factory Floor had a residency at the ICA and Chris and Cosey came to one of the shows. Paul Smith was there too, and he managed Throbbing Gristle at the time. I think Chris and Cosey saw something in my on-stage approach that was a little similar to theirs, so they asked if I'd like to collaborate with them for a show at the Roundhouse for Mute Short Circuit. I took some gear on a train to their place in Norfolk with no idea of how things would pan out, but they were super cool so I went back to their studio and they set up a table for me to lay my gear out on. As soon as we got plugged in, everything seemed to happen naturally. It was great to play with another guitarist who wasn't using the instrument in a traditional sense but was more interested in sound, resonance, feedback and noise. When we played together at the Roundhouse I was nervous because we were in front of a TG-dedicated crowd, but they welcomed me in and from then it was a no-brainer to continue our association."

As part of Carter Tutti Void you presumably had complete freedom to improvise, both on stage and on record?

"For the live shows we had a loose structure created in the studio and mainly directed by the tools we were using to appropriate different tracks. I was holding the guitar in the traditional way on-stage but using bow and sticks. With Factory Floor we were more competitive in terms of who could play the boldest noise, but with CTV Chris presented the underlying rhythms, which had an instantaneous groove, and Cosey and I responded in a way that was very natural and improvised. We've made three albums together, two studio-based, but Chris and Cosey have quite a strict agenda where they prefer projects to have a limited lifespan."

Was it Chris who introduced you to the world of modular?
"Definitely, when you walk into his studio it's just a wall of modular. I was gravitating towards the modular world anyway because I wanted to experiment more with noise and sound and Dom wanted to take a break from Factory Floor so I had a big hole to fill. Seeing Chris on numerous occasions meant he could give me lots of technical advice, but there's loads of help out there from companies who distribute modular synths. That's not something I encounter when going into a guitar shop, which is usually quite daunting and uncomfortable."

"I'M LOOKING FOR PEOPLE TO WALK AWAY HAVING FELT LIKE THEY'VE HEARD SOMETHING DIFFERENT THAT INVOKES A CONVERSATION"

Your debut album has been a long time coming. Why was now the right time to introduce yourself as a solo artist?
"Collaborating with other people has always been the main agenda. I'd done a few shows but didn't feel I'd reached a level of maturity where I had something to say as a solo artist. I wanted to make sure I was ready to release something that I could be proud of and represented where I was as a musician, so when Peter Rehberg of Editions Mego asked me if I wanted to make a solo record it stopped me in my tracks. The great thing about Editions Mego is that they didn't put any time constraints on me, but the devastating part is that Peter passed away and didn't get to hear the album."

Most artists would probably admit to releasing music before they were truly ready. Do you feel it's important to be self-aware before making that commitment?
"I'd had offers from other labels, but wanted to do it for the right person and not rush it. There's a tendency to make music that meets an expectation, but I needed to make a record that had no expectations. That's quite difficult in itself because expectations give you a guideline and I had no one to feed off."

The cover art to *Bucked Up Space* is very abstract. What's it depicting exactly?
"It's done by a Brazilian artist called Maria de Lima. I curated a show a few years ago and invited her to exhibit her work but this piece is actually a still from a video. It's about warped reality and I find that rebounding off visuals helps me to make decisions regarding my sounds. That resonates because you start with an initial idea that begins to turn into something else, especially in a live environment. With all forms of art, the listener brings their own interpretation so it's interesting that you don't know what the artwork signifies, but then if you listen to a lot of my tracks you wouldn't know what the sounds signify either.

The music is fractured but has a propulsive element to it. Is the objective to make people dance or take a more studious approach?
"I'm resigned to the fact that everything I seem to do is a contradiction. When I started making music with KaitO, if the audience responded straight away that would make me happy, but within the experimental world of NPVR and Peter Rehberg, people couldn't understand what we were doing, which was challenging in itself. This entire journey has shaped who I am. I couldn't make a banging dance album or an experimental album – it had to be between the two, but I'm looking for people to walk away having felt like they've heard something different that invokes a conversation. All of these things, whatever they are, are designed to introduce a feeling or a reaction that makes you feel alive, and that goes back to me watching bands like Pan Sonic, who had a massive sound system, and just feeling that sound."

It must be difficult to describe the music when your creative approach is so multi-layered?
"When you're in the process of making music, you don't reflect on it or analyse it in the way that you do when talking about it later. The whole

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NIK'S CHOICE GEAR

Deltalab Effectron Rack
"Arthur Russell was a big fan. Amazing delay and modulation results with hold on the delays and alternation on the pitch – like raw sampling in '80s NY."

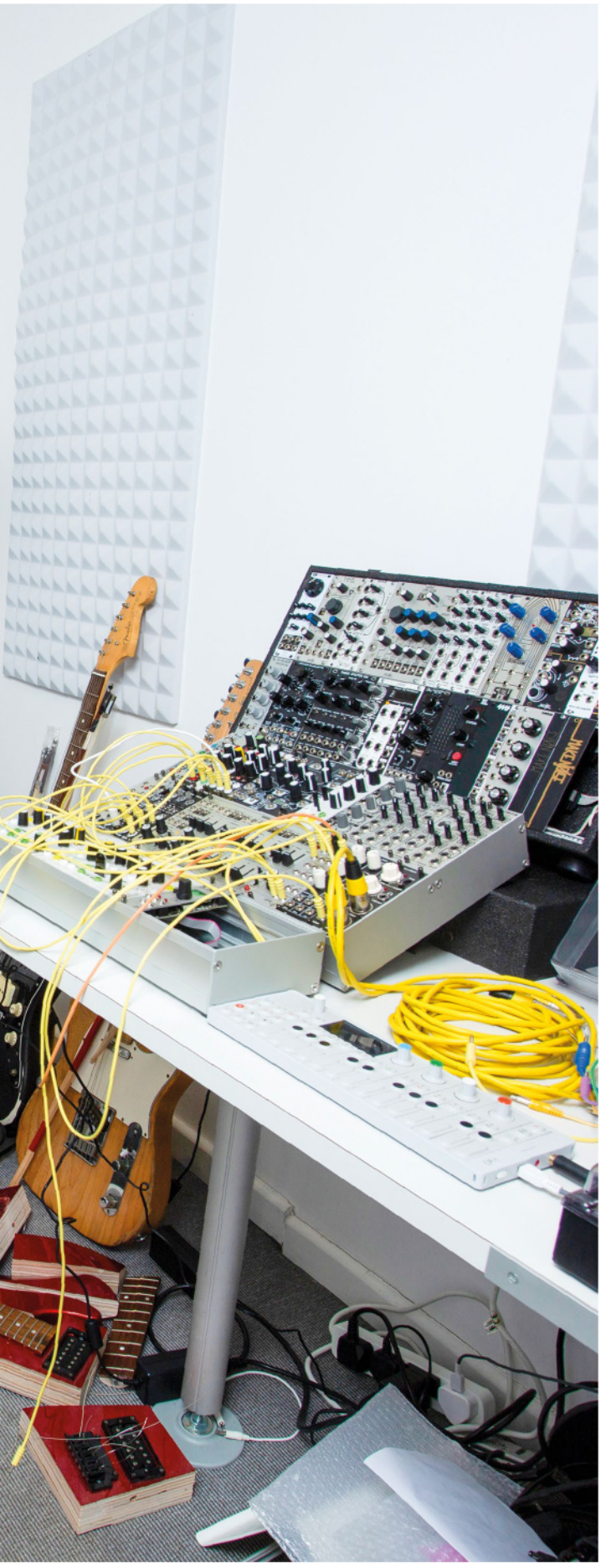
Elektron Digitakt
"Used for a lot of the layered rhythms on tracks like *FlatTime* and *Romke* that required more of a straight entry into beat-making."

Intellijel Atlantis Module
"Used extensively on the *Factory Floor* LPs and *Bucked Up Space*. A SH-101 clone and slightly cleaner in sound, it has a wider range of voice results and is easier to manipulate."

Make Noise Morphagene
"I still use a Fostex reel-to-reel for recording and splicing guitar feedback, so this is the ultimate playful Eurorack module for me."

Fender Telecaster
"A USA Fender '80s edition I found on Denmark Street 15 years ago. Harmonics are loud, but also soft. Great for extended technique playing."

Tiptop Audio Z-DSP
"A voltage-controlled effects module, I can shape and split the signal and spatialising the outputs boosts patches to a pro level. Used extensively on the album."



exercise is a process and the idea of putting my work into an album was daunting because I'd got so into improvising music that only exists in the present that committing those ideas to an album that people would listen back to started to make me feel uncomfortable. For me, *Bucked Up Space* doesn't really have a form – it's on the edge of everything. I can't work out whether I'm an artist or a musician because I've no idea where my music sits in the genre spectrum, but I guess that's representative of how everything is becoming nowadays."

So where did the recording sessions begin in terms of collating various audio for the album sessions?

"I moved to the countryside about six years ago and built a studio with the whole idea of it being set up for me to run a patch and instantaneously record it before using those recordings to prepare for a live show. Obviously, emulating what you've done on a modular synth is very difficult live, so I'd take those recordings and re-process them in a live environment, introducing sequenced beats and working various things out as I went along. Then I'd go back to the studio and spend two or three days doing more patch recordings and this went on for a few years."

How did those sounds evolve into what we hear on *Bucked Up Space*?

"Over time, I recognised that, due to their tones and textures, the recordings were working together and falling into groups of sounds. I put them into files and, because I'm now able to dial up beats quite quickly, took those ideas to a more professional studio in Margate, which gave me the discipline to create what I wanted the sounds to evolve into. There's something about walking into a studio and working with an engineer who can instantaneously record ideas and give you an element of feedback."

You felt it was important to have someone independent to just listen and help you make decisions?

"As I don't come from a musical background, when you overload yourself with ideas you sometimes ask yourself if it sounds right or is unlistenable. I think there were a couple of sessions where my engineer, James Greenwood, was probably thinking, I can't do this because it's too full-on, but he's got a good recording setup and it was interesting to have him help me introduce triggers and sequences that would create structured tracks out of those experimental recordings."

In contradiction to the music you make, your home studio is impossibly spotless and well organised…

"I'm so organised that I get excited about the whole regimented process of packing a case and setting up for a show. When I'm using modular synths, making sense of the chaos of using sounds that can escape anywhere means I need to have a blank canvas to walk into. So yes, the studio is white and minimal and all wired up for me to be able to plug in and record as quickly as possible. I'm also aware that when you have too many choices and options you can get to a point where you don't stick to your initial plan."

Let's talk about your modular setup, which is obviously integral to how you get creative…

"I bought an Elite Modular case and started slowly building that up. My first module was the Intellijel Atlantis because it's a clone of the Roland SH-101 and that felt like an easy place to start. The case has predominantly grown to facilitate using

KRAMER

TEAC
RE-711
Fostex

either synth voice or guitar, so there's a good amount of processing modules like the Tiptop Z-DSP and Make Noise Morphagene, which are an awesome way to mangle the samples that I make. I find it really interesting to have a case full of modular tools that you can get to know your way around, especially in a live environment. It took a while, but now I feel comfortable playing live without having to bring a little patch with me to start things off."

How much modular gear do you have right now?

"I've probably got enough modules to fit into three to six 84HP cases, but I need to start selling some because they've become redundant and you have to be really strict with yourself. The great thing is that you can always buy something new to influence your setup. I get really enticed by the ideas behind some of these new modules and their design – or just how they look, which I know is ridiculous, but I've recently found that I'm designing my rig to suit how I work on various projects, such as my recent collaborations with Klara Lewis and Alexander Tucker where I sometimes need different points of entry to modular."

How do you ensure you stay productive with modular?

"I'll give myself five minutes to work on an idea before moving to the next one, which is kind of harsh because you can get enjoyment from long sessions that go down a particular path, but I was finding myself getting overwhelmed by the amount of material I was creating. What's so unique and amazing about modular is that while people gravitate towards modular brands like Tiptop, Intellijel or 4MS that probably deliver the same processes, there's no way you can get the same sound as someone sitting next to you using the same equipment. You have to work and find your own language within the setup that you have."

> "AS WITH THE GUITAR, I'M TRYING TO REINVENT THE LANGUAGE AS FAR AS I CAN WITH VOCALS AND IT'S FUN PLAYING WITH VOCAL SAMPLES"

Do you have a recording chain set up to get from modular to computer?

"To get different variants of a patch I'll process it through the Eventide H8000, which is an amazing unit that you could never use live because it pushes sounds as far as they can go. I'll use the stereo out on the modular but tend not to record a multitude of ideas at once, just one patch giving me one sound and that goes straight into my Mac via a Metric Halo soundcard. I use GRM and iZotope plugins, but try to keep away from software in general as it tends to add another layer of complexity. The great thing about modular synth sound is that it's raw and pure and I want to capture as much of that as possible, so I record straight into the Mac and only think about outboard afterwards."

Are you using any other hardware to source sounds, or for effects processing?

"Not a huge amount. I've got an SH-101, the Teenage Engineering OP-1 and the Elektron Digitakt drum sampler and Analog Four synth. They're just pieces of equipment that I can reintroduce vocals into because recording, manipulating and processing is the biggest part of what I do. I also have an old Fostex reel-to-reel that I use to record on and mess about with the tape. For vocals, the further away that I can get from my natural voice, the happier I am and I'm still trying to understand what I can do on that front. As with the guitar, I'm trying to reinvent the language as far as I can with vocals and it's fun playing with vocal samples – the delays on the Effectron Deltalab rack have an amazing tonal quality to them that I haven't found on digital units. It's the same with the TC Helicon devices, which give you a really clear source. Most of the things I like to work with can be plugged in and give you an instant reaction."

How did you create the sounds used on some of the more delightfully odd tracks, like *Tender Supposition* and *Absence Pile Island*?

"I shifted the titles around at the last minute so it's hard to remember, but they all derive from the modular. The between section tracks were mainly extracted from samples that were fed into the Morphagene and then manipulated in free from. There are also drones that I pre-recorded using feedback on guitar and triggered used heavy modular processing. With *Absence Pile Island* I was using the Erica Synths Pico drum programmer to get very tiny sections of sound that could be triggered by sequencers, which I probably put through the Eventide H8000."

On-stage, where do you draw the line between experimentation and reproducing a track that is vaguely recognisable to the listener?

"That's something that I've been battling with a little because you do have to accept that certain things cannot be reproduced live. I use Ableton Live and do have some pre-recorded synth sequences lined up because dialling in modular sequences is really difficult to do on-stage and would be a massive risk. When I first started playing live, I felt that didn't matter and for me to feel that the music was real it had to be played in its rawest form, but with a record you do need to compromise and present the work in a way that is relatable for the audience. Having been to a lot of shows myself I know that people usually want to hear the original tracks back."

You've mentioned that you struggle to sleep before a gig, but then you also embrace on-stage accidents. What do you have a fear of exactly?

"The worry is that I might get lost getting to the venue *[laughs]*. When I'm on stage something takes over and I have a sense that I belong there making these 'things'. Sometimes your equipment is jumping across the table with vibration, but when you've collaborated with so many people at so many live venues, you figure out a way to work with a mistake and bring it into your set. When you reach that point, you can never really make mistakes." **FM**

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

Nik Colk Void's new album *Bucked up Space* is out now on Editions Mego. For more information, visit **nikcolkvoid.com**

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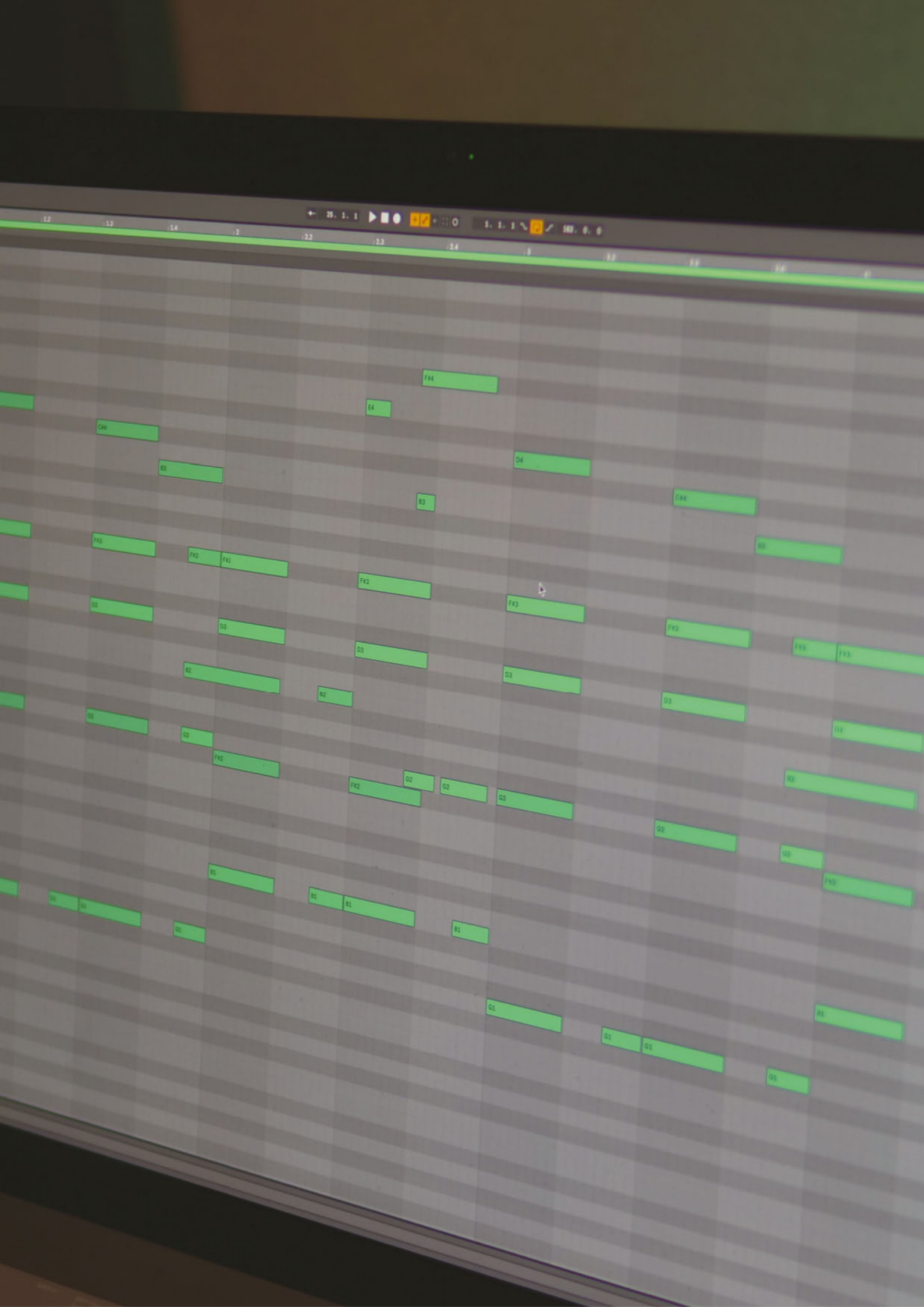


PRODUCE LIKE...

Ruth Royall

The Bristol-based drum & bass artist on her journey from session vocalist to solo producer

Ruth rates her AKG C414 microphone for vocals and Serum for synth sounds

Although Bristol-based drum & bass artist Ruth Royall only has a handful of singles to her name, she's no newcomer to the music world. Since the age of 14, Royall has been working professionally as a vocalist. She's previously recorded an album as a jazz musician and she has worked on numerous film and TV projects before eventually making her mark on the drum & bass world.

For several years she's been a go-to vocalist, working with the likes of Pola & Bryson, Ekko & Sidetrack, and Nookie, as well as touring with Fred V & Grafix and fronting Bristol-based live dance outfit Paper Tiger. The past few years have seen Ruth moving more and more into production, creating and co-producing her own tracks in order to, as she tells us, establish her own style and sound.

We caught up with Ruth in her Bristol garden studio to find out more about her journey from session musician to DnB producer, her gospel-inspired vocal chain and how she's learning her craft through collaboration.

> "I WANTED TO BE CLEARER ABOUT WHAT MY OWN SOUND IS, WHICH IS MORE SOULFUL"

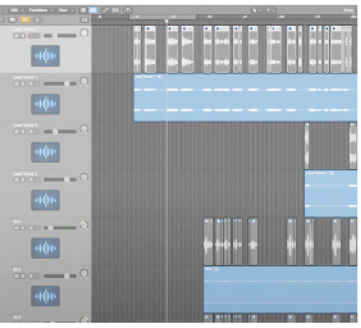
Tell us a little about how you got into music originally?

"I've been involved in music-making almost all my life. I started off in jazz, I was a session singer and I started off doing backing vocals and lots of TV work. I still do quite a lot of stuff like that actually, writing for adverts and things. I'd always been into dance music the whole time, at least listening to it. I came back from London a few years ago, as I'd been doing the session circuit up there, singing with all sorts of different people, and when I came back to Bristol I got asked to do the tour with Fred V & Grafix. And that was what got me into the drum & bass world, which is where I now live!"

How did your latest track *New Ride* come together?

"That was actually an instrumental that was sent to me from a producer called Phonetic. I wasn't actually going to put it out as my own track, it was quite a while ago that it was sent and I just ended up really getting into it, so I decided I wanted to finish it. I wrote the top line and we got the production where we wanted it to be. It felt like quite a good time to put that one out too, as it has quite a lot of funk influence. I quite like to do that

The Bristol-based producer likes using plugins like Hooked to complement her already pretty exceptional vocals



kind of funk and soul with heavy DnB production. It seems to work really well. Then the subject matter, which is all about new beginnings and starting a new adventure, it just seemed quite well suited to how everything is at the moment with people starting to come out of lockdown in the UK."

Will that be part of a larger EP or album, or just a standalone track?

"It's one of a series of singles that are coming out. It's not necessarily going to be making up an EP, but I've got releases lined up for the rest of the year coming out on various different labels. This is the beginning of a string of solo releases, which is cool. Most of it's my own production, a few are collaborative productions too."

Is getting into the production side more of a recent thing?

"It's something I've been doing for a while but I haven't been putting out tunes with my own production. The next few tunes that I've got coming I've produced or co-produced. When I first got into drum & bass I was a topline vocalist, so I was always being featured, which is great and I love doing it, but it meant I was always jumping around styles. One release would be liquid, the next release would be dancefloor, the next something else. I kind of wanted to be clearer about what my own sound is, which I think is a lot more soulful and maybe a bit heavier than what people know me for. People often associate me with liquid, which I do love, but isn't really what I wanted to make.

"I do a lot of production, arrangement and writing for the TV work that I do. It's nice now to be able to feed that into my own solo stuff and put out tracks with my own feel and style."

Do you feel like coming from a vocal background feeds into your production approach?

"Yeah, I think musicality feeds into it, definitely. I think one of the things I'm strongest at is arrangement. I can play too; I play keys and guitars and some other stuff. I'm writing a lot of the parts and I'm able to put those together quite organically. The beatmaking and the mixing side is where I need to collaborate more at the moment. That's the side of stuff I'm working on, but the musicality is where I'm strongest.

"I've trained as a vocalist and I've been a songwriter for around 15 years, so it was a natural progression to make. Drum & bass is such a production-heavy style of music that it's quite scary to go into that and start calling yourself a producer. Everything gets so scrutinised that you put out, and it can be quite daunting, but that's a challenge that I really wanted to take on.

"I'm loving it too, the people I've been collaborating with for this next set of releases have been so open to what I do. I'll bring a track that's nearly finished, or at least has all of the artistic parts that I want, and they'll be like, 'OK, this is how we get the bass sounding like this or the snare sounding like this'. It's been a really great experience because they're not taking over or taking anything away from my sound or the artistry I want to put into it. They're seeing what I'm bringing rather than trying to put their own stamp on it, which isn't an easy thing to do as a producer."

> "I'M WRITING A LOT OF THE PARTS AND I'M ABLE TO PUT THOSE TOGETHER QUITE ORGANICALLY"

Have you been mostly in the box with your production so far?

"I do have some synths but I tend to not use them. I was given a Modal and a UDO synth to play with, and it was really cool to have those synths to make wubby sounds on, but then I tended not to use them. I end up just using plugins, things like Serum, which is the main one I use. I work in Logic and I just tend to stay in there. I do have my preamp, which is quite a big part of my vocal chain. It's got quite a vintage sound, from the mic I'm using and everything in my chain. It's quite a gospel/soul take on my vocals, which I think translates really well into the modern dance sound. You get that raw element to it. The rest is mostly plugins." FM

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

New Ride is out now via Our Space

Watch Ruth take us through her creative process and tell us why she loves her AKG mic at: **musicradar.com/how-to/future-music-383-downloads**

GET THAT SOUND...

Ruth Royall breaks down her vocal chain for *New Ride*

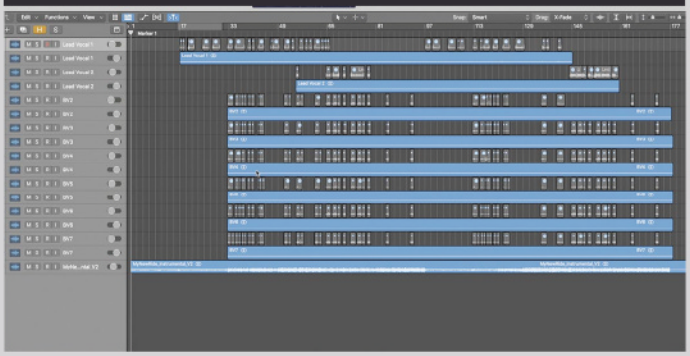
INCLUDES VIDEO: SEE PAGE 8

01 >

"I use a little bit of hardware in my vocal chain, I have a Focusrite ISA preamp that I love. It gives quite a lot of warmth to my tone. I also have a Focusrite interface and an AKG C414 mic, a vintage one. That adds a nice quality to the vocal. I like to approach vocals with kind of a gospel/soulful feel. I try not to over-process them."

02 >

"I use Logic to record. I start a whole new project for vocals, so I don't overload everything. I'll do the processing then bounce that in place so I can bring that into the other project for the instrumental. On this track I have quite a lot of BVs going on. I pan my backing vocals around for that kind of choral effect."



03 >

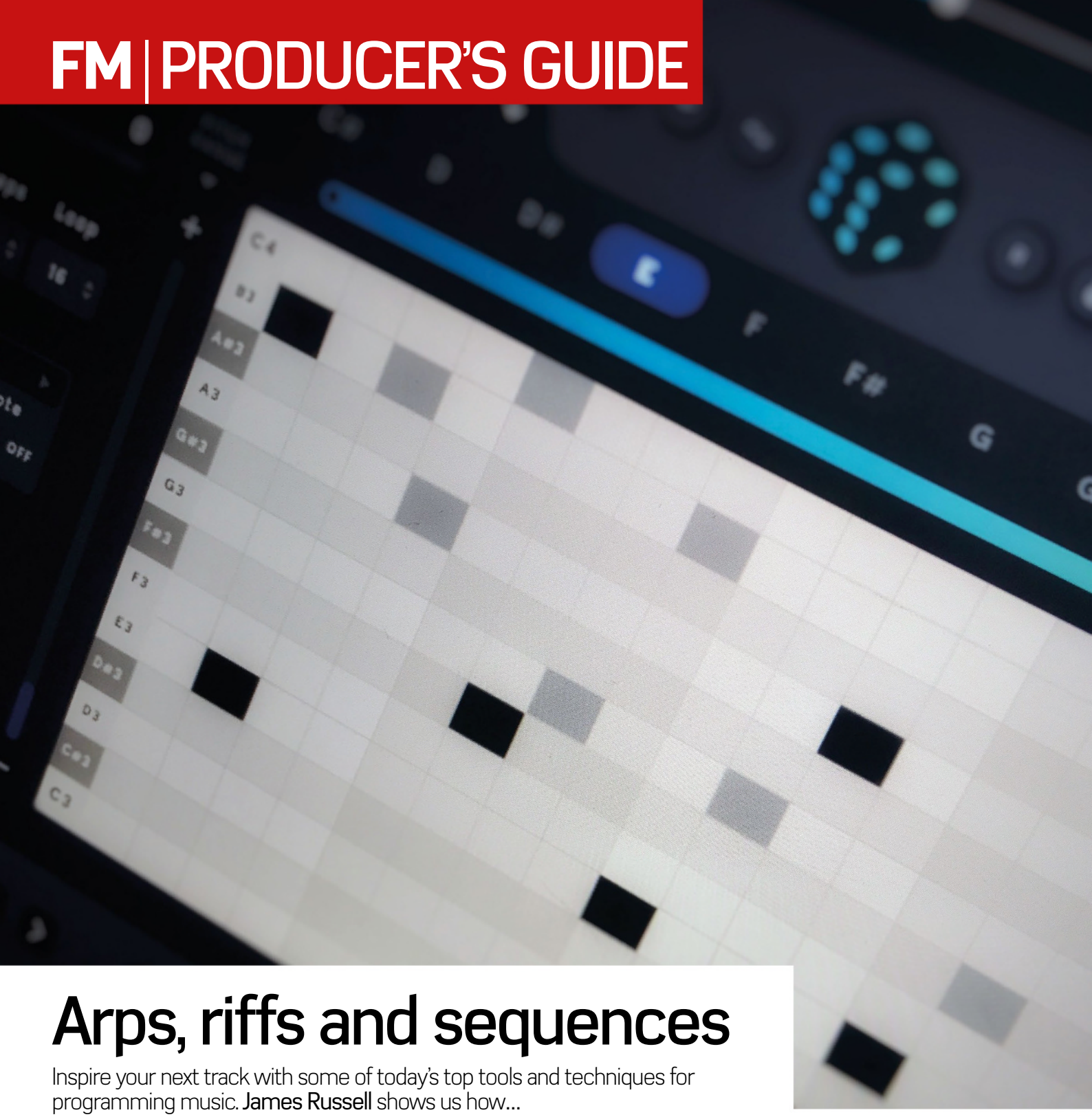
"The reverb that I really love to use on my vocals is the Valhalla Vintage Verb. I don't really do anything that special to it. I'll usually stick it on as it is, sometimes I'll roll the low-end off, but on this track I've just left it as it is. I put two reverbs on this track. I've put a plate reverb on too which I've panned slightly to make it feel more roomy. That feeds into that gospel vocal sound."

04 >

"The other thing I always use on my vocals is iZotope Nectar. It's got loads of really great presets for vocals. I like to use one called 'Wide Lead'. I tend to stick that on and then remove a lot of it, taking out the reverb and delay so I'm just using the EQ and compressor. That seems to work really nicely for my vocal, though."

05

"I tend to compress my voice quite heavily. One compressor I use, which is free, is the Xfer OTT. I was quite pleased with how the vocal on this track came out. When I record I do so in mono, but when I bounce the track in place I have it in stereo and it gives a much wider sound, spreading it out a bit. I think that's what you really want with a dance or pop music vocal."



Arps, riffs and sequences

Inspire your next track with some of today's top tools and techniques for programming music. **James Russell** shows us how...

In the '80s, developments in music programming inspired a whole new way of writing and producing music. Drum machines, after steadily creeping into pop for a while, were suddenly everywhere, as were sequenced melodic patterns from indefatigable synths. Was this the death knell for homegrown, organic musicians as we knew them? Far from it.

Although emerging artists who embraced music programming tech at the time faced disapproval from bewildered forebears (and who doesn't?), this evolution in music-making methodology only gathered pace from then on. Programming music used to require you to have some form of either analogue or digital hardware, but the wide world of computers and DAWs soon turned all that on its head. Today, almost every artist programs their music, mostly in a broader sense through the use of MIDI in a DAW, but also using dedicated software sequencers and arpeggiators that function in similar ways to the equipment of the past.

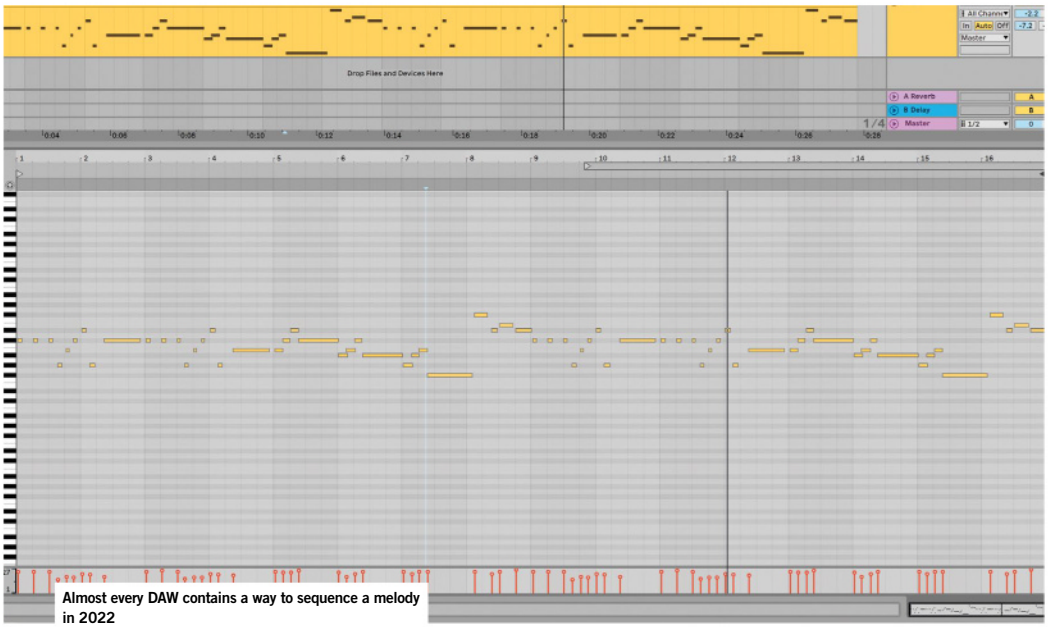
Most DAWs come with basic sequencers, which divide musical measures into a predetermined number of 'steps' and generate repeating musical patterns; and arpeggiators, which take the MIDI notes from a held chord (or single note) and play them as a rhythmical pattern. Many MIDI keyboards and controllers also have built-in sequencers that let you hijack practically any keyboard, synth module, or software and set about programming patterns.

In the context of your track, these patterns can either be as simple or as complex as you want them to be. Creating a repeating melodic pattern on a synth arpeggiator is as simple as holding down one key, but you can also wield immense control over how your programmed patterns unfold. You can even use sequenced multi-effect plugins to automate effects parameters in a pattern-based way, rather than relying on other methods like drawing automation curves.

The thing is, by programming patterns, melodies and loops, you're freed from the responsibility of actually having to play those pesky notes in real time. It doesn't matter

if you're not a nimble-fingered keyboard player – you can still have a synth arpeggiator pattern that crosses three octaves in your track, regardless of dexterity levels. Furthermore, safe in the knowledge that the sequence you've set up is progressing, space then opens up to experiment with mixing, dynamics and layering in other instruments.

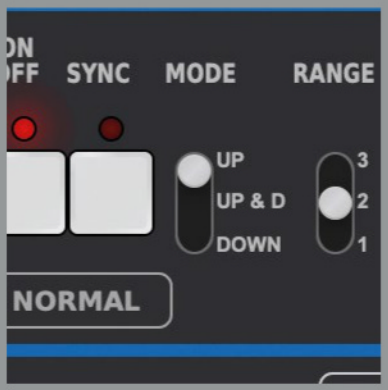
This can be useful in a live environment obviously, but it also provides you with interesting creative avenues when noodling around alone. Working with MIDI, it's easy to quickly write a riff and then have it played back to you through whatever instrument you have loaded. Can't play an instrument? Innovative compositional plugins can keep your riffs between the guide rails.



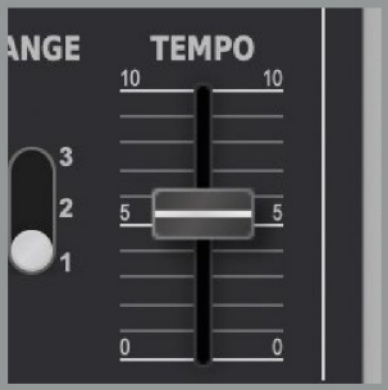
Almost every DAW contains a way to sequence a melody in 2022

Basic synth arpeggiation

1 Let's take a tour of a basic synth arpeggiator, using TAL-U-No-LX. Switch on the module's On/Off button. Hitting the Sync button synchronises your arpeggio with MIDI, while leaving it off means it stays free-running.



2 There are three arpeggio modes: Down (pattern descends from starting note), Up & Down (pattern ascends and then descends) and Up (pattern ascends). The Range switch affects how many octaves the arp will pass through via these modes.



3 Controlling the speed of the arpeggiator is done with the Tempo slider. With Sync enabled, the tempo is synced to a source at either 1/8, 1/16, 1/32 or 1/64. With Sync disabled, the tempo ranges from 1 up to 25Hz.

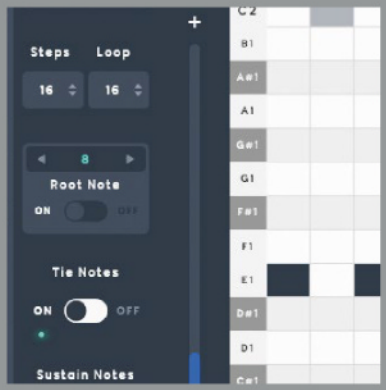
4 Now that we know how it works, let's create a busy synth pattern. Set the Range to 3 and the Mode to Up & D. Turn on Sync, and set the Tempo to 1/16. Hear how the pattern changes when chords are played.

5 There are further features on the TAL-U-No-LX arp that enable smooth music making and help it integrate in your DAW. You might want to cycle through patches using the arpeggiator, so the Lock button ensures your settings stay put.

6 To go completely hands-off, you can click the Hold button, which causes your arpeggiator pattern to play continuously. Switching on Host when Sync is enabled syncs the arpeggiator to your DAW's internal time, essentially quantising it.

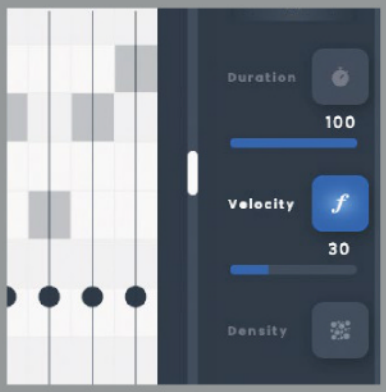
Evolving synth sequences

1 Let's create an evolving synth part using Riffer. First, select a key, and then set the number of steps to 16. Adjust the amount of notes to eight and hit the Randomize button until you get a pattern you like.



2 For a bassline, switch to the second tab and adjust the key, steps and notes similarly. Before you hit Randomize, set Root Note to eight notes and turn it on. Toggle the Tie Notes switch and turn the pitch down two octaves.

3 On top of that we'll add randomised high notes. In the third tab, set the key and steps but stay at 16 notes. Set it to an octave above the first tab, and hit the Infinite button. Now the pattern will change every two bars.



4 Remove unwanted rolls by clicking on Density, and removing the highlighted notes. Soften the intensity of the high notes in the sequence by clicking the Velocity button and reducing the range. Add a short delay to the track to fill in space.

Sequenced madness

The term 'sequencer' refers to music software or hardware that can record performance data and play it back in sequence. That might seem like a pretty simple definition, but innovation in the ever-evolving world of music production has meant it's not all that simple.

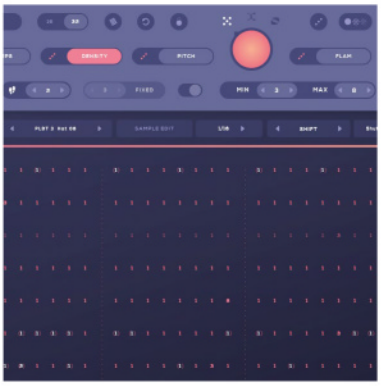
The first sequencers appeared in modular synths in the '60s, and you'll find the fundamentals of that design in today's models. Then came sequencers with expanded digital memory, with MIDI-outputting synths being used to control multiple devices. Digital sequencers were soon built into drum machines or keyboards.

When MIDI interfaces started to appear on computers, software sequencers were born. These applications evolved into what we now know as DAWs, and the many functions that exist within these types of software packages means they have outgrown that definition. You'll probably find a sequencer in your DAW, and there are entire sequencer-powered synth and effects plugins out there that come with advanced controls.

Minimalist drum grooves with Audiomodern Playbeat

1 Load up Factory Preset 01 and remove the generated pattern by selecting All and then hitting Reset. Draw in a simple four to the floor kick pattern on the first line, and remove any rolls by setting everything to 1 in Density view.

2 Click line 6 for an FX sound. Set the step range from six to 12, and randomise the pattern until it feels right. In the Pan tab, set the minimum value to L50 and the maximum to R50. Now randomise for some stereo ear candy.



3 Add hats in line 7, and set the steps to ten. Vary the hat by creating a pitch range from E1 to E4 and hitting Randomize. In the Density tab, add some rolls by setting the Steps to two and a three to eight range.

Commanding an advanced arpeggiator

We've already seen some of the basic functions of arpeggiators and how they can inspire you. But these parts of synths have been around for a few decades, and in the meantime, a succession of hardware and software makers have spent time pushing the envelope and improving the feature set available from an arpeggiator.

Native Instruments' Komplete Kontrol is a great example of what a more modern, digitally based arpeggiator can do. Komplete Kontrol was designed to host any given Native Instruments synth, Kontakt or Reaktor instrument, and many by third-party developers as well. In doing this, NI had to make sure their arp features were up to the task, and with their Smart Play features, they've given both amateur and professional producers a ton of new ways to use the instruments they load into the software – whether they're playing using a MIDI controller or the company's Maschine hardware.

In the tutorial below, we're going to give you a tour of Komplete Kontrol's Smart Play features, showing you how you can make the most of them to create musical ideas or turn a track that's getting a bit stale into a more interesting, feature-filled piece of music. Komplete Kontrol software is required if you want to follow along to the letter here, but the features we're discussing are commonplace on many of today's soft synths and DAWs. You can access Komplete Kontrol's Smart Play arpeggiator from within the plugin or the standalone software, from the three musical notes icon.

> WITH THEIR SMART PLAY FEATURES, THEY'VE GIVEN BOTH AMATEUR AND PROFESSIONAL PRODUCERS A TON OF NEW WAYS TO USE THE INSTRUMENTS

Going further with Komplete Kontrol Smart Play

1 Find the Arp tab and switch it on. With an instrument loaded, play or program a chord and it will be turned into an upward 16th-note arpeggio. We can change the speed with Rate, and the Type between Up, Down, Up-Down, (as) Played, or Chord.

2 From here, mess with Sequence and Swing to add humanisation. Swing lets you push arpeggiated notes off the grid and Sequence is a set of eight pre-programmed rhythms. These dials work alone or together and are better in moderation.

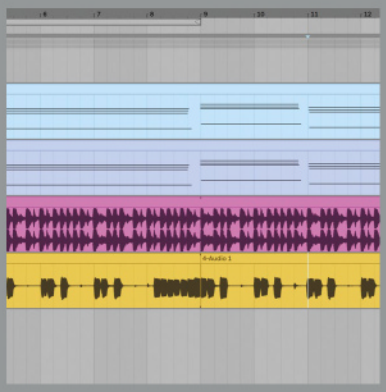
3 The Octaves setting will repeat whatever you play over however many octaves you set it to, relevant to the Type selected. For example, in Down mode what you play is repeated in progressively lower octaves, and up mode in higher ones.

4 Dynamic and Gate will allow you to shape the arpeggiated notes. Dynamic affects variation in velocity, accentuating or reducing differences, whereas Gate affects the effective lengths of the arp's played notes.

5 Behind the Advanced tab are more controls. Repeat lets you program how many times you want the arp to repeat each note. Inversion works like Octave, but will only move the bottom note up each repeat, creating a continuous ladder effect.

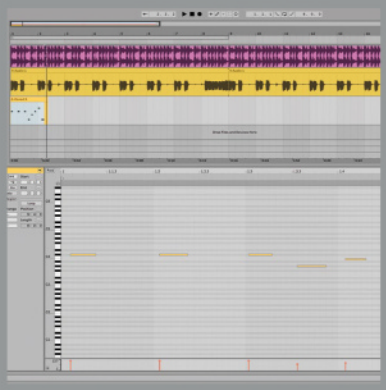
6 Range lets you set the arp to only work over a given chunk of the keyboard, helpful when you want to play a bassline independent of the arp. Hold keeps the last chord played repeating, letting you automate parameters while it goes on.

Making better melodies and hooks in MIDI

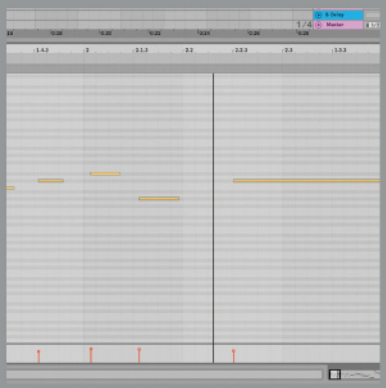


1 Getting good at writing melodies takes practice, but there are a few techniques you can employ to make quick improvements. Let's write a catchy melody over a simple eight-bar backing loop, with drums, bass and a pad.

2 First, we'll load up a synth plugin, Dexed, and choose a preset that will work as our lead sound. We're looking for something warm and glossy, but with a brassy sound that will cut through and stand in front of the other sounds in the mix. We chose the Banks, T preset.



3 Hooks generally benefit from repetition, both with individual notes and phrases, because it reinforces the musical idea in the listener's brain. Our loop is in A♭ minor, so let's program in a phrase that uses the notes of that chord, but starts with a repeated D♭, the subdominant of the scale.

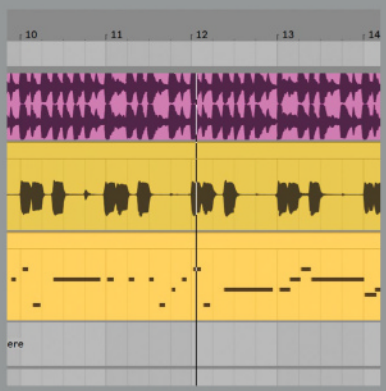


4 By making the notes of the riff very short, you draw attention to its rhythmic interplay, and how the melody interacts with other elements of the track. By extending the last note, the D♭ that we started with, we add much-needed contrast. This works with this particular patch, but might not with others.

5 Now that we have a short musical phrase, we can repeat it to further reinforce the hook in the listener's mind. This time though, let's add movement and end the phrase on B♭, instead of A♭. This is a 'call and response' melody, and suggests we're progressing towards a musical conclusion.

6 Repetition is great, but too much of it can make a melody feel boring and unimaginative. Let's mirror the downward movement of our final note on each phrase by introducing a four note pattern, the center of which descends along the Ab minor scale towards the root note.

7 We're getting towards the end of the eight-bar loop, and we need to tie things together with a flourish. Writing good melodies is about being aware of what's going on around you, so let's complement the bass guitar fill that ends the phrase.



8 Letting the hook play out over 16 bars, you can hear how the melody sets itself up to repeat. If we wanted to transition into a verse or bridge, we could pick a note that works within the next section harmonically, and let it trail out by automating the volume or reverb send.

9 When balancing your lead sound's frequencies, consider the other elements that are present in the track. If there's a lead vocal in the center of the mix, tailor your lead instrument so that it's thinner, and sits further out in the sides. If it's the main focus, then give it weight and thickness.

What makes a great melody?

In general, good melodic ideas are based on either a chord progression or a scale. In practice, this means picking out a selection of chord tones (the notes that make up each chord) from a chord progression, or using the notes of the G major scale if the song is in the key of G major, for example. Major and minor scales usually contain seven notes, but you can write memorable melodies using fewer notes.

Although it might sound counter-intuitive, a great melody doesn't always have to be that melodic either. Technically, melodies can also be monotone rhythmic patterns. Some hip-hop vocal melodies fit this category, as do a lot of hooks in dance music. If you can tap into a rhythmic feel that's the kind of thing you might hum to yourself in the shower, you're onto a winner.

THANKS TO COMPOSITIONAL SOFTWARE, YOU NO LONGER HAVE TO KNOW YOUR WAY AROUND A MUSICAL STAVE TO WRITE MELODIES

THREE OF THE BEST

Sugar Bytes Factory $150

1 With four sequencers, Factory from Sugar Bytes is a modular synth with endless sound design possibilities. By using the 16-step sequencers as sources for the plugin's modulation matrix, you trigger the envelopes, LFO and Arp for heavily modulated, rhythmic patterns.

sugar-bytes.de

Audiaire Nuxx $45 (or $5.99 p/m)

2 A powerful multi-FX processor with a dedicated parameter sequencer and 30 effects types. Each effect parameter can be modified in its own independent sequencer lane, on one screen.

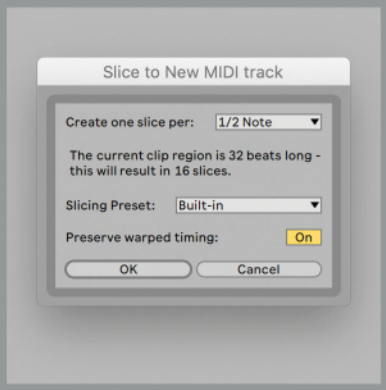
audiaire.com

MixedInKey Captain Plugins $99

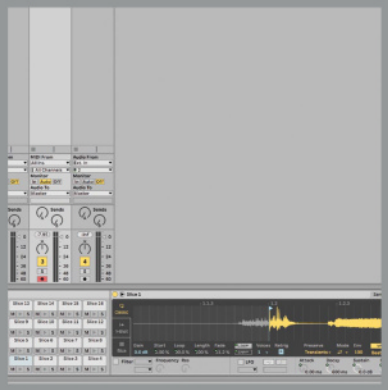
3 Five interconnected music composing plugins that can help you to write hooks and melodies. Each plugin intelligently syncs to the others in the chain, matching the key and following chord changes, and you can use other third party VST plugins as sound sources.

mixedinkey.com

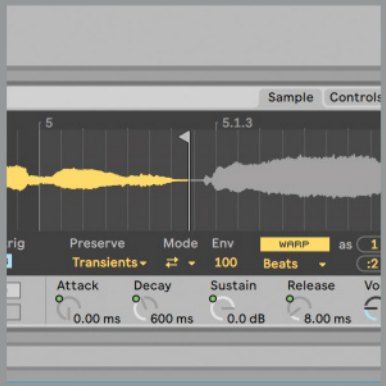
Stuttering vocal hooks



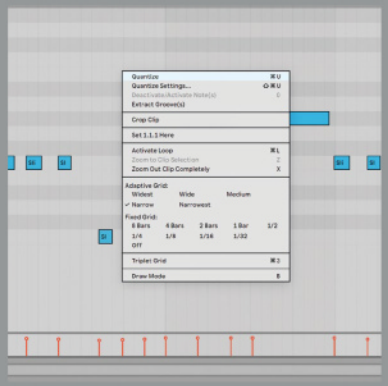
1 Let's use Ableton to create choppy dance hooks with a vocal sample. First, add a vocal sample onto a scene on an audio track. Right click it and hit Slice to New MIDI track. Our vocal sample is 32 beats long, so we'll chop it up in ½ notes to get 16 slices.



2 A new MIDI track will open up, with the vocal sample sliced and laid across the MIDI keyboard. Click into each individual slice and play around with the start times to get the sounds you want. Try not to have silence at the start of any note.



3 Trial your slices out on your keyboard to get a sense of what you can achieve musically. By jamming in 16th notes, we can repeat just the start portion of the vocal to get a stuttering effect. Reduce the Release time to 8ms to help keep the notes tight.



4 Finally, we can add some variation at the end of the hook by programming a longer MIDI note, which will trigger more of the vocal sample. You can add delay and reverb via Ableton's send knobs, and quantise the MIDI clip to get everything in time.

ACT!

From Egyptrixx to ACT!, David Psutka's sound experiments defy categorisation. **Danny Turner** grills the Toronto artist about his creative process

Since arriving on the electronic scene in 2008, David Psutka has never been one to compromise. The Toronto-based producer has attempted to reconfigure club music with his brittle digital drones and phosphorous textures, collaborating and releasing albums under the names ANAMAI, Ceramic TL and Egyptrixx, the latter supplanted by his latest project, ACT!, in 2018.

Psutka's improvised approach demands each album starts with a blank canvas; therefore it's of little surprise that his second ACT! album *Strange Bounty/About Life* should take a striking left turn. Primarily written on guitar and processed via a series of MIDI converters and modular manipulations, the addition of vocals lends the album a bizarre familiarity amidst its tonal anarchy.

How have you found running your Halocline Trance label through this difficult period?

"Like most people, at the beginning of the pandemic I felt like I was at a crossroads, especially in terms of what I wanted to do with the label. Initially, it was created to facilitate my own work because I've created a lot of eclectic projects over the years and it made sense to give them a home base. However, the pandemic seemed like a good moment to open the label up to other artists because I feel there's a real appetite to generate music at present."

Why did you retire your Egyptrixx project and create ACT! for the majority of your releases now?

"Egyptrixx felt like it had reached its natural arc, although I'm not sure if it's been completely retired as I don't think in terms of chapters and timelines. That project was very much situated in club music. It wasn't an attempt to make a straight club sound but to meditate on that experience, so the rules for the music were quite different to what I'm doing now."

Rather than guide the listener in a particular direction, your music seems to instead ask them to interpret a feeling. Are you guided by those sensations when you're making it?

"For my solo work, each project has certain parameters that I try to stay within, but it is more about how the sounds make you feel, the atmosphere they create and the experience of engaging with sound as opposed to chasing specific genre signifiers. For me, it's about the actual sensation of connecting with an instrument and creating moments, whether in a live context or through static recordings. The whole Halocline Trance family has a multimedia approach, with musicians, graphic designers and video artists working on projects together, and that helps give an identity to my work."

We read that you get up at 5:30am to work on music. Presumably there are no distractions at that time?

"I'm an early riser, but I also have a four-year-old daughter so it's nice to have some serenity and focus, which is harder to achieve when she's awake *[laughs]*. During the pandemic my rhythm and daily cycles were disrupted due to not being able to go to venues, play shows or go on tour, but I discovered that my brain patterns work a little differently in the morning. I feel like I'm more creative and focused, but as the pandemic recedes I have to try to keep that going."

What were some of the conceptual ideas behind the new ACT! album *Strange Bounty/About Life*?

"The guiding principle behind this record was about returning to the guitar as a central instrument, which it had been earlier in my life but somehow got lost along the way. I've been making music for a couple of years that's very process-heavy with a lot of the compositional ideas coming from modulation and modifying instruments. With this record, I had the urge to play again, improvise and write and generate ideas without thinking too much. I'm not a keyboard player, so I used a lot of MIDI conversion and A/B routing by sending the guitar through various synths and MIDI boxes to generate synthesiser sounds."

You'd never know the album was written on guitar. Was the objective to disguise it?

"Whether writing on guitar or other instruments, the process usually starts with lots of improvisation. At some point I'll document that, edit things together, refine and cobble until only the vestiges of conventional songwriting remain."

The addition of vocals brings quite a new element to your sound, and you collaborated with Robin Dann and Alanna Stuart on that front?

"I was mostly looking for vocal and compositional ideas and I've wanted to work with Alanna and Robin for a while because they're a great songwriting team. They added vocals to most of the tracks and some of my vocals are on there too. We did hope to be a little more physically connected but could only work when the pandemic would allow us, so certain months we'd get together in a room and other times we'd send files back and forth."

Alanna's vocals, in particular, really change the tone of your music…

"I wanted the album to have an element of digital electronic dub – that '80s mad professor sound that has a lot of songcraft in it, but is driven by sound design and atmosphere. I knew that both Alanna and Robin could tick those boxes and their voices add a really beautiful human dimension to the songs, which is key to how a number of the tracks work. Compared to the rest of my back catalogue, there's definitely a unique vibe to this record."

Did you sample a gaming machine for segments of the track titled *Lotto*?

"They're all samples from casinos that I got from an open source sound bank called Freesound. There's a couple of field recordings throughout the record that I made myself, but the sounds you mention on *Lotto* and *50 Million Motives For Making* help tell the story of the song a little more clearly. I've always been really interested in the sensory experience of casinos and gaming arcades, especially the sound, colour and malaise of these places. The sounds, lights, blackened windows and volume create a very deliberate and intentional sensory experience."

The environment is designed to keep you there, we believe – no clocks…

"I've read about the experiential engineers who design these venues – it's similar to shopping malls where a lot of things are thought through from the temperature of a room to the level of ambient sounds and volume, which are all designed to create a light hypnosis. Casinos, especially, are quite an experimental music environment with all of the blippy, attuned sounds and soft polyphonic melodies, and I guess *Lotto* taps into some of that."

Do samples suggest ideas to you or are you using them to fill in the blanks?

"To be honest, it's hard to remember what I did on some of this album but I know that I had a thematic focus for each of the tracks and began collecting field recordings. *Lotto* has a lot to do with optimism or a false sense of hope and manipulation, which is part of gambling or consumerism in general. They're coaxing people to hope for the best even if it's unrealistic – a kind of toxic positivity."

Your studio setup is fairly limited gear-wise…

"Over the past five years I've definitely been getting rid of more gear than I've added. Around 2017, I started to let go of a lot of synths and chose to focus on just a few, but I work semi-regularly out of Junior Boys' Jeremy Greenspan's studio. He has a big workspace about half an hour from here and we've been working together for years now. Jeremy's vision is the complete opposite to mine – he has every piece of gear ever made and because I have access to all of that stuff I can afford to keep my space incredibly streamlined."

At what stage might you visit Jeremy's studio to enhance whatever you're working on?

"He has a big studio built around an analogue workflow with everything recorded to tape. He has an SSL console, cool analogue synths and a great collection of outboard compressors, EQs and stereo effects. It also contains lots of weird Altec preamps and old keyboards; facilities like that are getting harder to find. We do a lot of mixing and production work together, we're always working on something."

It sounds like he provides analogue while you focus on digital hardware synths from the late '80s or early '90s?

"I sold all of my analogue synths to Jeremy and since then I've been buying digital synths and some Eurorack stuff. I guess the Korg Wavestation is mid-'90s and the Yamaha DX7 is more early '80s, but I have a couple of Waldorf Blofeld desktops, which is a newer synth and that's probably the one I use most for creative sound design and workflow. I'm really into random LFO patterns and the Blofeld has a matrix that can almost be used as a modular system because you can map any controller to any parameter. But I love the Roland JD-800 and have a massive collection of around 100,000 different DX7 voices at my disposal if I need to find something. I'm not a synth snob, so when I finish this record I'm looking to start collecting some analogue synths for my next project."

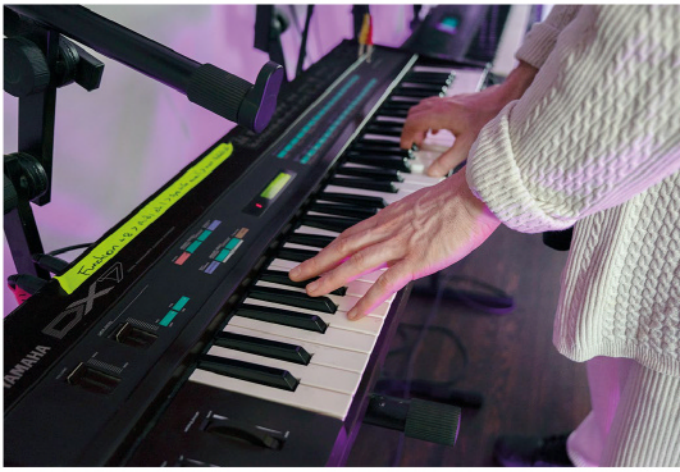
> "I'M NOT A SYNTH SNOB, SO WHEN I FINISH THIS RECORD I'M LOOKING TO START COLLECTING SOME ANALOGUE SYNTHS FOR MY NEXT PROJECT"

As with guitar, do you aim to process your hardware synths through external machines?

"Some of it's going through pres, but a lot of the sounds on the record are straight from synths like the DX7.Transposition and mapping from one instrument to another is a big part of my process. For that, I'll turn to my Kenton MIDI box and I also have another one made by Sonus who make great little audio MIDI solutions, especially for guitar. I use those every day in the studio because they take whatever I'm playing and convert it to MIDI. I'll also play guitar through an amp and that might go into a synth or possibly a DAW and back into a synth, so I do tend to use lots of routing."

Your Eurorack setup is quite condensed but plays a big role in your sound…

"The first semi-modular thing I owned was my System 100 and I've been collecting modular stuff for about 10 years, but I'm now down to a very small Eurorack setup consisting of modules from Synthesis Technologies, Pittsburgh Modular and Mutable Instruments. I have a couple of oscillators and a few weird LFOs and filters, and I like to use splitters on my modular rig because I prefer to take a source and put it through a few different machines. The Kenton audio


YAMAHA
DX7

Digital Reverb
RV-5
BOSS
MF DELAY
MF CHORUS
moog
analog chorus
SUPER EGO
synth engine
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electro-harmonix
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MXR
fet driver

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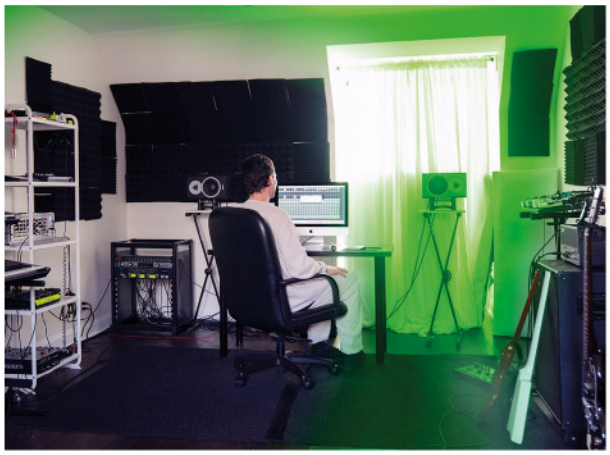
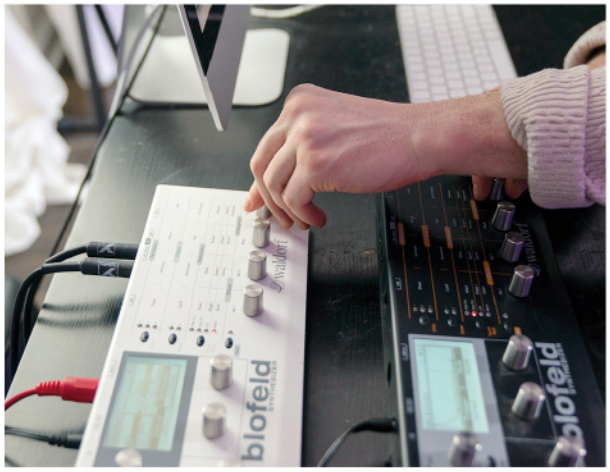
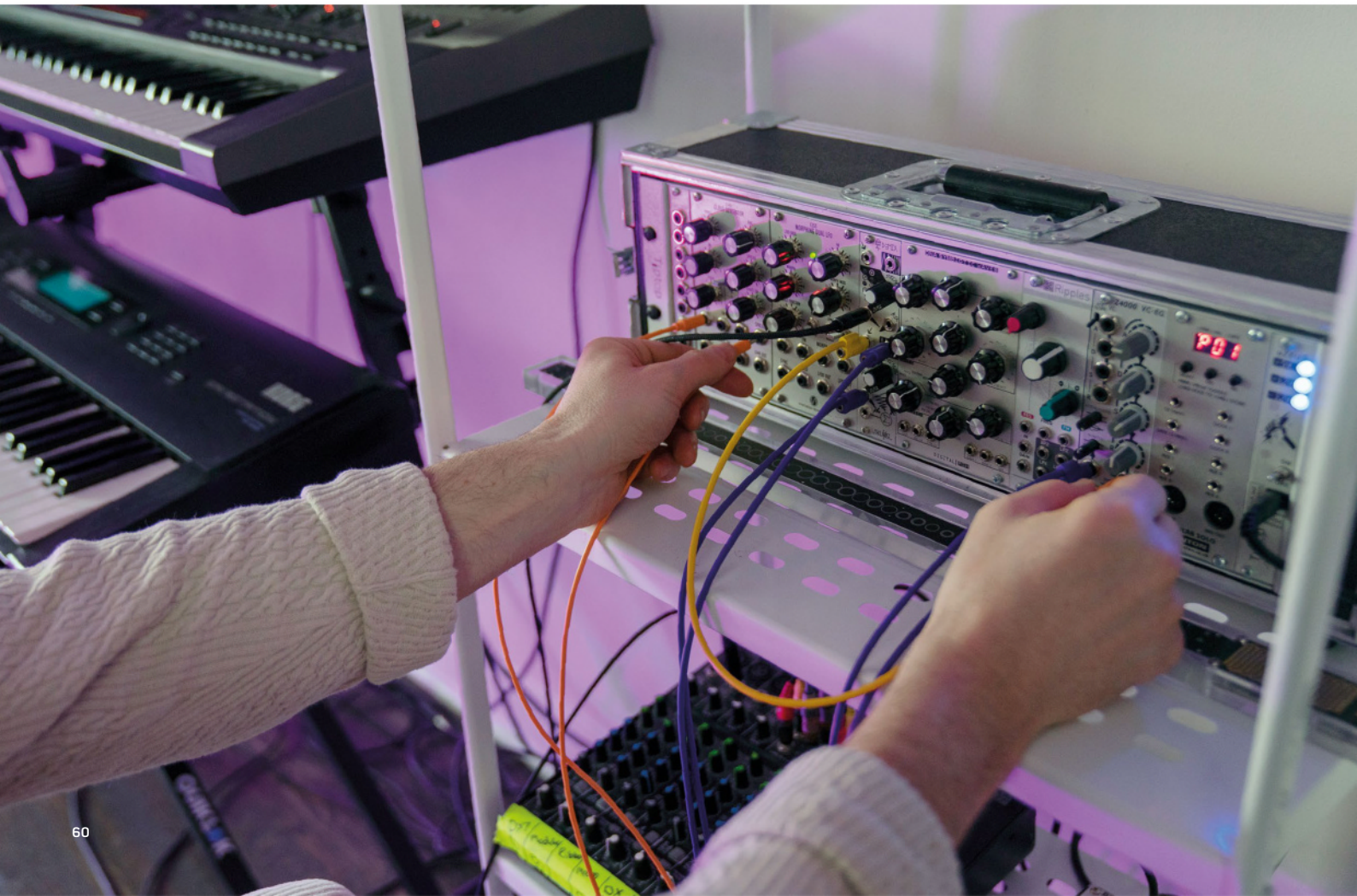






"I'D BE WORRIED IF I HEARD INTERESTING MUSIC THAT WAS BEING GENERATED ALGORITHMICALLY, BUT I DON'T THINK WE'RE THERE YET"

MIDI to CV converter is great for Eurorack, so I'll often send that into the PC or other things. The plan is to move into a new studio next year and expand my modular setup a little because I love the creative workflow. It's totally unpredictable and once you start patching you can end up anywhere."

There are lots of modular sounds on the album, and they often sound quite uncontrolled…

"With the ACT! material the tension is always between the musical and non-musical sounds. All of the songs combine traditional musicianship and songcraft with lots of noise and non-musical elements and I find that modular is an amazing paintbrush to create all of those non-conventional sounds."

You're not one for staring at a screen?

"I use a combination of Reason, Ableton or Pro Tools depending on the process, but I'm spending less time looking at the screen now, especially for this record. There's some automation mapping, which is a DAW-centric process, otherwise the PC is mainly used for a little MIDI editing and audio capture. I do mix completely in the box, so I have to use a lot of plugins for my mixing environment, but I don't use a lot of VST synths and don't like looking at screens."

Where do you stand on generative tools for music?

"I've been working with an AI/AR collective in Toronto and we did a soundtrack together last year. That stuff is definitely interesting to me, but I'm not sure if it's brand new. The idea of generative or autonomous music is very cool – I actually did a lecture on this subject last winter and surveyed a lot of the stuff that's out there. Much of that technology is not fully formed yet, but conceptually I find it very interesting. Anything with oscillators or LFOs is fundamentally generative, and that's been a part of synthesis technology since the beginning, but there's always a human being conducting or shaping it. The coolest AI generative tool I've been able to find is a lyric generator. To me, that felt very novel, but I've not seen anything that's completely disruptive – most of those applications are just a few degrees beyond whatever's commonplace with modular or most DAWs now."

Does the lyric generator provide lyrics to music you've fed in or is it more simplistic?

"It's from a simple website called theselyricsdonotexist.com. You just give it a few parameters and it basically pukes out a whole song with lyrics. I'm not an expert, so probably shouldn't be talking about it publicly, but a lot of the audio and song creation AI tools are just core generators that have existed for a long time and wouldn't normally be classified as AI. How do I feel about the idea of human obsolescence? I don't know if it's being threatened. I'd be worried if I heard interesting music that was being generated algorithmically, but I don't think we're there yet. With new technology you often get people who explore a space just to see if they can, but you could uncharitably call that a gimmick."

Have you had time to compute the direction that this album has taken you in and where it might lead you in your future projects?

"I'd been through a period of experimentation for a couple of years where a lot of my work was spontaneous. I was trying to challenge myself to be bold, brash and impulsive, but this record signifies a new chapter for me. It's more refined and musical-sounding and I feel that my workflow will be more intentional going forward. I've agreed to a big tour in January next year, which will be built around the guitar, the Blofeld synth and some MIDI DMX automation mapping. I like taking modular synths out live, but they're kind of a pain to take through airports. Airport security is getting a little more familiar with them now, but they still look a little bit like explosive devices." FM

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

The forthcoming ACT! album *Strange Bounty/About Life* is released June 3rd on Halocline Trance. For more info, visit **actactact.bandcamp.com**

Mount Kimbie took one dubstep into the future with their late '00s EPs

Post-dubstep

It's not hard to guess the roots of post-dubstep, but should it count as a musical genre at all?

Most genres are defined by their sound, but that's not always the case. Sometimes it's better to think in terms of an overall musical movement, defined not by its audible characteristics but by what it represents in contrast to genres which came before. The most obvious examples are genres like post-punk (a late '70s/early '80s movement which aimed to introduce a more expansive, experimental approach to punk) or post-rock (defined by music writer Simon Reynolds as "using rock instrumentation for non-rock purposes"), but you could certainly say the same for post-dubstep.

In the late 2000s, the dubstep scene was at a crossroads, with the deeper sound of the genre's UK roots being overtaken commercially by the heavier, more aggressive styles heard mainly from the US. As some producers began to feel alienated by the rise of 'brostep', members of the scene turned their attention to different styles. The term 'post-dubstep' was coined around 2009 to describe this wave of artists rejecting the way dubstep was heading and looking in new directions.

What quickly became apparent was that the music being produced by 'post-dubstep' artists wasn't necessarily coming from a common place aesthetically. Producer and writer Martin Clark (a dubstep mainstay under his Blackdown alias) argued that it was easier to define post-dubstep by what it wasn't than what it was: "It isn't grime, either in its pop, instrumental underground, or MC-lead variants. It isn't dubstep, in either of its remaining dominant styles, wobbly brostep and eyes-down halfstep. And it isn't house & funky, though this movement has had a massive catalytic effect on our as-yet-unnamed/defined genre."

As such, you could lump all sorts of different sounds into the post-dubstep category. Joy Orbison's 2009 single *Hyph Mngo* was initially filed under dubstep, but in retrospect it might be the definitive post-dubstep track, sitting effortlessly in an uncanny valley between dubstep, house and UK garage. Mount Kimbie's 2009 EPs *Maybes* and *Sketch On Glass* fused dubstep influences with R&B, ambient music, post-rock and IDM. How about the delicate house shuffle of Jamie Woon's *Night Air* (2010, co-produced by dubstep-not-dubstep icon Burial)? Or what about Jamie XX's *We're New Here* (2011) remix of Gil Scott Heron's *I'm New Here* album (2010)?

Questions about the best equipment for producing post-dubstep, or the tempo range and other stylistic tropes, are largely redundant. Post-dubstep was defined much more by the artists who made it than how it sounded: largely people who had been involved in the dubstep scene on some level, either as producers, DJs or just fans. In that respect, James Blake is commonly seen as the poster boy of post-dubstep, thanks largely to his involvement in the scene in his younger years and the clear influence of the music on his early releases like *The Bells Sketch* and *CMYK* EPs. By the time of his self-titled 2011 debut album, Blake's music was far more complex than those early instrumental releases. Still, the post-dubstep tag stuck, at least until his 2013 *Overgrown* album.

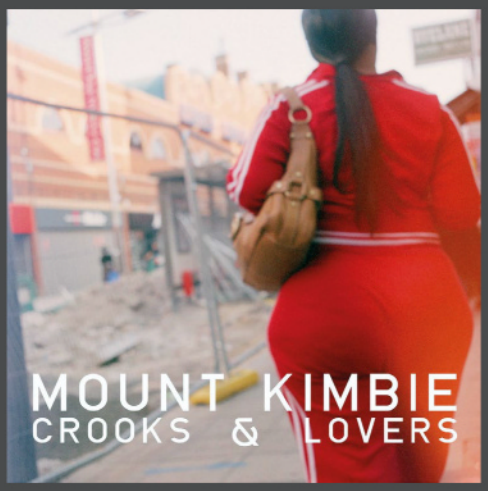
As time has passed, the genre name feels a bit obsolete. It seems obtuse to refer to artists making post-dubstep music in 2022, well over a decade after that initial burst of creativity. To define such a multi-talented, creatively versatile artist as Blake by referring to music he made in the very early days of his career seems reductive at best. Likewise, it's not necessarily a genre that newcomers to production might aspire to create. The jury's out, but either way you look at it, the post-dubstep era was a fertile moment for UK underground music. **FM**

© Gary Wolstenholme/Redferns

Three post-dubstep essentials

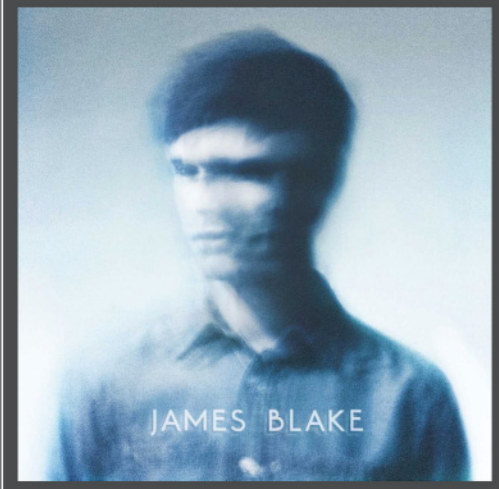
Joy Orbison – *Hyph Mngo* (Hotflush, 2009)

A hard track to pigeonhole at the time, but one which makes even more sense as time goes by. Originally filed under dubstep, *Hyph Mngo* is a joyous technicolour dancefloor weapon. A hell of a debut release for an artist who has gone on to sustained success.



Mount Kimbie – *Crooks & Lovers* (Hotflush, 2010)

Pairing beautiful sound design with field recordings and live instrumentation, Mount Kimbie's first studio album felt unlike anything else at the time. Bringing ambient music influences into the world of post-dubstep experimentation, Dominic Maker and Kai Campos established their singular sound as one of the most exciting things to come from the dubstep scene.



James Blake – *self-titled* (ATLAS, 2011)

Not as directly influenced by dubstep as his early releases like *CMYK* and *The Bells Sketch*, but Blake's eponymous debut album showcased how elements of dubstep influences – drum production, synth design, sub-bass – could work in a more mature, vocal-driven context. Witness the wobble bassline on *Limit To Your Love* or the freaky percussion on *Unluck*.

© Yann Rabanier

LORAINE JAMES

The self-described IDM artist tells **Matt Mullen** how Slate + Ash plugins and the Hologram Microcosm shaped her new project, Whatever The Weather

Loraine James' *Reflection* stood out as one of 2021's most inventive releases. As a self-identified IDM producer, she's single-handedly propelled the (somewhat musty) category into an entirely new era, swapping out dated sci-fi references for sonic blueprints drawn from drill and R&B, and substituting the genre's implied superiority for an endearing sense of vulnerability.

James' latest project, Whatever The Weather, further explores the cerebral, glitched-out aesthetic that marked her previous work while taking fruitful detours into vaporous textures and pensive ambience. It may be released on a new label and under a new alias, but this is more than just a side project: it's served as an opportunity for the producer to explore improvisatory approaches and unexpected influences that didn't feel as if they belonged to her self-titled work. We caught up with James ahead of the album's release to find out more.

What was the thinking behind your decision to create a new alias for this album?

"I had a few songs on whilst making *Reflection* that I liked, but didn't know what to do with. I thought I'd start another project, and it turned into another alias."

> "I PRETTY MUCH JUST USE ABLETON. THERE'S BEEN A FEW TIMES, LIKE ON *SENSUAL* FROM *FOR YOU AND I*, THAT I'VE PLAYED THE KEYS IN LOGIC"

What led you to decide on the weather-related theme, in both the artist and track names?

"Track titles are often the last thing on my mind. I just thought I'd tie in the name with degrees. I don't know if I'll continue doing that, but I thought it'd be cool in this project."

Do the temperatures have any relation to the mood of the music?

"It's just based on warmth, how warm or cold a track sounds to me. Obviously someone else could listen to it and think that's 10 degrees colder."

What prompted you to choose Ghostly International as a home for this project?

"I've been a fan of Ghostly for many years, like with Hyperdub as well. They reached out to me, and I did a remix for Lusine last year. It was just an open-ended conversation about possibly doing a record with them, but I didn't have anything on at the time. I thought this album would be perfect for it."

When you were sitting down to write or record, were you going in specifically with the intention of making something for this project - as opposed to a Loraine James track?

"There were some songs where I thought: is that a Loraine James song, or is it something else? The Loraine James stuff has more structure, but Whatever The Weather is a bit softer and more ambient. The next record might take another form, I don't know what that'll sound like."

You talked about doing a lot of improv on this record. How do you create a balance between jamming and improvising, and more structured tasks like arrangement and mixing?

"Sometimes I don't like thinking, this part has to be exactly four bars, and so forth. Sometimes I'll hit the record button and just go, ignoring the metronome and just doing whatever. I'll improvise for five minutes and condense that into a song."

On previous albums you've worked with a fair few guest vocalists. What led you to avoid that on this project and focus on your own vocals?

"I didn't imagine this record to have people on it, it just didn't make sense to me. I love the Loraine James stuff being much more collaborative, with vocalists from different musical backgrounds. A lot of the stuff that I make is by myself, but either I don't release it or it becomes a Bandcamp thing."

Could you pick out one or two bits of equipment – anything from a synth to a plugin to an effects chain – that were fundamental to the making of the new record?

"I used this Kontakt software called Slate + Ash on a few songs. They messaged me one or two years ago about it – I didn't have anything Kontakt-related, but I downloaded it and tried it out, and ended up creating a lot of cool stuff I'd never really made before. A lot of the songs on this project were from that. Some of them didn't make the album, but a lot of the demo stuff did.

"You can throw in any bit of audio to the plugin, so I'd go into either Logic or Ableton and quickly jam a riff, a five or ten-second riff, throw that into Slate + Ash and do something from there. I didn't really use their own sounds, but I wanted to see what my own stuff would sound like in there."

So you're using both Logic and Ableton – are you using each for different tasks?

"I pretty much just use Ableton. There have been a few times, like on *Sensual* from *For You and I*, that I've played the keys in Logic and added stuff in Ableton. I find it easier to work in – I actually only started learning Ableton for live stuff, but ended up producing with it as well."

Has your studio setup evolved significantly over the past year or two, as your career has progressed?

"I've mainly been sticking to what I know. I did get a Novation Peak last year, which I've just started using. I've never used an actual synth in my stuff before, so it's been cool playing with that. I've just got a pedal, too, and I'd never used a pedal before – the Microcosm. It's really nice, I like it."

There's definitely a glitchy sound to a lot of your music, with a lot of small and subtle variations in your beats and melodies. Is this mostly achieved through close editing of audio on the timeline, or are you using any hardware, like the Microcosm for example?

"Sometimes I'll manually do it myself, I'll just really randomly cut up wherever, copy and paste and randomly change the

"I'LL PLAY REALLY LATE SHOWS, AND I FEEL LIKE I CAN'T PLAY A SONG LIKE IT'S MEANT TO BE PLAYED. BUT I DON'T REALLY LIKE IT TO SOUND EXACTLY LIKE THE RECORD"

pitch. I'll do a few bars of that, then listen back to it to see if it makes sense to me or not. I did that for a while, but doing that for a whole song is quite long. In some parts I'll do it manually, and in others I'll use Beat Repeat and Glitch 2. It's a mix of those."

What was the thinking behind the decision to ask Telefon Tel Aviv to master the record?

"I look up to him a lot. I know he's sick at mastering stuff, and I just thought it'd be wicked for him to master it and make it sound as good as possible. He did a really good job."

In terms of influences, were there any particular artists or albums that were inspiring you while you worked on this project specifically?

"Not massively, I was sort of in my own bubble at this time. I started this record while I was still making *Reflection*, I was just finishing that off, and *Reflection* was a different mindset. This record was less personal, and there was less to think about structurally. I don't think a particular artist or record inspired me, but it was a nice thing to do opposite *Reflection*."

You've talked before about a fascination with math-rock and Midwest emo. We can hear that in some of the melodies in this record, especially in those melodic patterns on 6 Degrees. How do you think those styles have influenced your own?

"It's really just the way I play the keys. I want to get back into that – after school I would just play on the keyboard, and a lot of it was inspired by the guitars in math-rock and Midwest emo. I definitely want to incorporate more of that again, I used to do that a lot before I released anything properly."

Are you planning to tour this material at all? What's your live set-up looking like for these tracks?

"Just one show at Cafe OTO. The live setup's looking pretty much the same. I haven't rehearsed at all, so I've got no idea yet, but I reckon it'll be pretty similar to the Loraine James shows. I'm just using a MIDI keyboard, the Novation Launchpad and the Launch Control."

Do you find yourself improvising much when performing, or are you mostly trying to recreate the record?

"There are bits of it where it'll sound like the record, but sometimes I like to play a glitchier version, or a slower version, or a sped up version. It's often dependent on the environment and the line-up I'm on. Sometimes I'll play really late shows, and I feel like I can't play a song like it's meant to be played. But I don't really like it to sound exactly like the record - I feel like you could just stay at home and listen to that."

Are you working on anything new?

"No, not at the minute. There are a couple of things coming up, but I haven't worked on anything new this year. I feel like I might start on another Loraine James record this year, but I don't know yet." **FM**

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

Whatever The Weather's self-titled debut album is out now via Ghostly International

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FutureMusic Platinum Award

Sequential Take 5 £1229

Sequential have taken the core ingredients of the Prophet-5 and repackaged them into a more compact and contemporary synth. But, **Andy Jones** asks, does it add anything new?

KEY FEATURES 5-voice analogue polysynth with digital control; 44-note semi-weighted Fatar keyboard with velocity and aftertouch; two VCOs and a sub osc per voice; Prophet-5-lineage 4-pole analogue filter; Vintage knob for increased instability; two LFOs (1 global, 1 per-voice); two ADSR+delay envelopes; extensive modulation; 64-step polyphonic sequencer; multimode arpeggiator; two effects generators (dedicated reverb + multi-effects); 128 factory programs, 128 user; **I/Os:** stereo out (2 x 1/4-inch jacks), headphone out, MIDI in/out/thru, USB, footswitch and pedal; **DIMENSIONS:** 635 x 324 x 112mm; **WEIGHT:** 7.71kg

THE PROS & CONS

+

Fantastic, compact design and build

In-depth modulation features, sequencer and arpeggiator give it a modern feel

Neat Low Split feature allows you to extend the keyboard range

Quality Prophet-5 ingredients allowed to blossom with newer features

–

Five voices will not be enough for some

Pre-release, the Take 5 was rumoured to be a cheap Prophet-5; then when the first models arrived, we heard that it was a Sequential in Novation clothing, the first product to arise from the purchase of Sequential by the Focusrite group, which also own Novation. The truth is, it's none, and all of the above…

Take 5 has analogue ingredients with digital controls and effects. With its name, five notes of polyphony, two analogue VCOs and a Prophet-5 style filter, you can understand the comparisons with the latest Rev 4 of Sequential's classic Prophet-5 line. But Take 5 grabs that greatness and is unconstrained by any reputation, so it's doing what the heck it likes with it, creating a synth very much for the 2020s rather than emulating one from the late '70s. It really is its own synth, then, and for a very decent price all things considered.

I certainly wouldn't have had a problem if Take 5 indeed was a cheap Sequential in a Novation case, but it actually feels very much like a four-figure synth – very solid and well made. There's a mix of incremental pots, easy to turn for distinct parameters like BPM, effect type, arpeggiator and octave, and continuous controllers for options like envelope and filter parameters. These are somewhat stiffer, but I'd expect them to loosen over time.

There's a fabulous large Filter Cutoff dial in the centre of the synth which demands, and will receive, full attention. Pressing down some of the buttons – for preset selection, for example – does press the whole front panel down a little too much in my book, but otherwise this feels like a high class synth. Looks-wise it reminds me more of an Access Virus or, more obviously perhaps, a Novation Peak and I'd certainly put it up there with either in terms of attitude and feel.

Take 5 is definitely a modern synth albeit with classic ingredients. The 5-note polyphony will surely lead to a 10-note or expansion option. Then there are the two VCOs and a

THE ALTERNATIVES

Novation Peak
£1,350

Another synth that very much bridges both analogue and digital albeit with extra wavetables and three more notes of polyphony. Peak has as many varied and quality sounds but will cost you just that bit more.

novationmusic.com

Sequential Prophet-5
£2899

More classic sounds and architecture, an arguably bigger and brighter sound and most definitely a bigger footprint. And you'll pay a lot more for it.

sequential.com

Korg Prologue
£1,399

8-voice analogue synth with effects. Really easy to program and sounds great. Just one of many choice polys in this crowded sector of the synth market.

korg.com

sub per voice. Both VCOs feature a continuously variable waveshape going through sine, saw and pulse options and Osc 1 will sync to Osc 2. There's also a variable pink to white noise generator in the mixer section.

While the filter on Take 5 is the same as the 4-pole analogue, self oscillating resonant filter from the Prophet-5 Rev 4, and both synths feature a Vintage knob to introduce more unstable analogue elements to your sound, the similarities between the two synths start to dwindle from here on in as you discover Take 5's many other features.

In terms of additions, Take 5 has two LFOs (P5 has one), a feature-packed arpeggiator, 64-step polyphonic sequencer, two DADSR envelopes, an FM switch for classic bells and whistles, an extra Overdrive control and two effects generators, one a reverb, one a multi-effect with chorus, delay, ring mod and more.

While P5 has the quite glorious Poly Mod feature where you can introduce simple but dramatic modulation in an instant – one of my favourite features of the synth – Take 5 has more modulation options that will cover that, albeit perhaps not so easily and quickly to implement. There's certainly more flexibility and depth available, which handily brings us to said sounds…

You can't avoid Take 5's roots as you go through its factory presets – it boots up with one called 80s Cal Dreamin, a big fat, clean lead straight from that decade – but the synth very much drags you forward beyond that. There are eight banks of 16 Factory sounds accessed with a dual-button combination to access the bank and then each of the 16 sounds within it assigned to its own button.

Many presets are tied to the arpeggiator for obvious impact that will have you reaching for the Filter Cutoff dial to increase the drama. Others worth auditioning include AnalogFM (106), a sound that perhaps not surprisingly morphs between an analogue lead and electric FM piano – and is far better than how I've described it. FreewayDrivin (111) is perhaps Sequential's arpeggiated take on Autobahn (grab that Filter dial again); Gnarly Tenths (115) really

> You can't avoid Take 5's roots but the synth drags you forward beyond that

COMPARING TAKE 5 WITH A PROPHET-5

OK, so Take 5 is a quite different proposition to a Prophet-5 in many ways, but it does share a similar core architecture and, of course, that filter, so we're almost duty bound to make comparisons. I don't think they are aimed at the same markets – just look at the price and feature differences – but you still can't deny that Sequential have launched Take 5, for better or for worse, with a kick up its backside from the P5.

Comparing raw tones, you can quite easily reset both synth presets back to a raw waveform ('Basic Preset' on the P5 and 'Basic Program' on the T5) and then tweak each to match parameter values. Honestly, I could tell little difference with the raw waveforms; both synths were swapping around, sounding brighter or duller than one another on occasion, but broadly identical. It's pretty much what you'd expect given the similarities at the core level, with the P5 perhaps displaying slightly more grit and dynamic range but very marginally. Take 5 excels on sounds with more movement, built-in arpeggiations and modulation; sounds the P5 can do but does rather less of as it focusses on bigger, classic voices. Each has their own character, then, even if they share core values.

demonstrates extreme aftertouch, a clean lead that becomes filtered and filthy the harder you press.

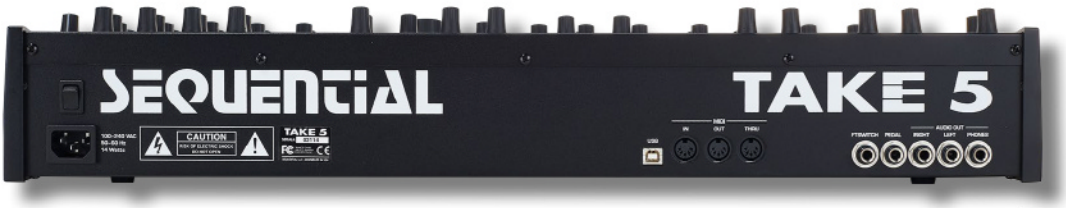
Indeed it's these other-worldy sounds that make the odd real sound (Koto, 216, and UpFrontBrass, 302) initially sound out of place. JustAnotha808 is huge, anything but 'just another' 808 kick, it displays the dynamic range of Take 5, and it's not entirely sure if it's a kick or a bass sound but is massive either way. Just as vast, Abyss (513) takes you on a cavernous film score journey – and it must be said that Take 5 is as such a composer's dream.

As with Prophet-5, there are plenty of big and deep electric piano sounds (515) made all the more characterful with the Overdrive knob which I found a little more dramatic than the Drive option in the filter section that is best used with the Resonance control to deliver more subtle bass oomph. There are basses and leads more suitable to bigger dance genres scattered throughout (particularly in bank 6 and do check out the likes of AnthemArp, 807) although perhaps not as many as you might like. That said, the hands-on controls – one action per knob – and the easy arpeggiator make it super simple to create your own to save in one of the 128 slots.

Dual effect options

I should also touch on the effects here which can really change a sound beyond recognition. I've mentioned the dedicated Overdrive control, but over on the right are two Effects blocks. The lower one is a dedicated reverb while the upper one allows you to step through delays, tape, chorus, flanger, distortion, speaker and phaser effects. Both have a few major parameter dials to tweak and neither effect is particularly subtle – big, filthy distortions and huge, messy reverbs are very easy to achieve – but you can have a lot of fun here. They are, like everything else on Take 5, direct, up there with my favourite features on the synth.

Overall there is a huge range of sounds: deep, rounded basses and gloriously big pads. There are less of the 'real' sounds but these often excel with FM richness and there are plenty of moving (literally and emotionally) sounds that make use of Take 5's extensive modulation features. And these are so very easy to explore: you assign sources (from 19) and destinations (from 54) with the dedicated buttons and the Select dial, and you're away.



KEYBOARD: Low Split is a fantastic addition, allowing users to extend the keyboard range.

FILTER: The large, central cutoff knob demands hands-on tweaking – and many presets make the most of it.

BUILD: Take 5 is sturdy and modern looking, although perhaps not as portable as Sequential claim.

EFFECTS: Excellent effect processors can alter sounds beyond recognition, for some real sound design fun.

You get a lot of synth with Take 5. Big, ballsy analogue sounds, crunchy and lush digital effects, modulation options aplenty, arpeggiation and sequencing, the latter as easy as hitting Record and playing up to 64 notes. There's also a Chord Memory option where single notes can trigger chords using the Unison option to memorise notes. Better still is the genius Low Split keyboard switch that shifts the lower end of the keyboard down by up to two octaves for more extreme keyboard playing and recording. This affords Take 5 a smaller footprint, ideal for tight studio spaces, although I'm still not convinced it's quite as portable as Sequential sell it to be.

The synth is also simple to use, and sounds more contemporary and certainly more soundtrack-friendly than the classic Prophet 5, yet still retains that characterful Sequential sound – lush, dreamy, and gritty when you want them to be.

And by now, you should perhaps have realised that we shouldn't really be comparing it too much with the P5 as Take 5 has come out of this review as being very much its own synth, launched under the ominous shadow of the Prophet but actually with none of that classic machine's constraints. Almost like Sequential said to its developers, 'take its core ingredients and make them fly'. And it really does. It's taking those best bits and the Sequential message to a new audience, and in that respect it really does deserve to be listened to. **FM**

FM VERDICT

9.2

Take 5 is very much its own synth trying to make its own way in the world. And it'll do just that. A compact poly with fantastic sounds

FutureMusic Platinum Award

ASM Hydrasynth Deluxe

£1529

The original Hydrasynth made an impressive debut for ASM. **Bruce Aisher** asks if the new model adds extra magic

CONTACT **WHO:** Ashun Sound Machines **WEB:** ashunsoundmachines.com **KEY FEATURES** 16-voice polyphonic digital wave morphing synthesizer with Single/Multi Dual/Keysplit voicing modes and dual stereo audio outputs, CV/Gate, USB and MIDI connectivity, Keyboard with 73 full-size keys and Polyphonic Aftertouch, Multi-function ribbon controller (Modulation, Pitch bend, Theremin mode).

THE PROS & CONS

+

Extremely flexible oscillators and filter section which allow the sound engine to go from analogue-style warmth to steely FM coldness

Polyphonic aftertouch and ribbon controller really add to the realtime control possibilities

Larger keyboard and dual sound engine make this a great performance synth

–

Module Select buttons are all lit with the same colour even when selected, which makes navigation hard

No way to directly enter patch numbers

ASM's original Hydrasynth was an impressive debut, so how how does one go about creating a 'deluxe' version? In basic terms the Hydrasynth Deluxe combines two Hydrasynth sound engines into one unit and marries it with a 73-note keyboard. Obviously, there is a little bit more to it than that but ultimately this version is intended as the senior partner in a range that starts with a compact mini-key version (in the guise of the portable Explorer, see p76).

Hydrasynth Deluxe keeps much of the look and layout of the original, with only a few extra buttons and a balance knob on the front panel as clues to the functional difference. This means that once again you get a solid metal case, backlit buttons, OLED screens and a combination of continuous rotary encoders and pots for making parameter changes. Programming sounds involves all of these, with a matrix of module selection buttons allowing you to dive straight to the relevant sound engine component (oscillators, filters and LFOs etc). This very much reminded me of an expanded version of that employed effectively by Ensoniq's ESQ-1 – a classic hybrid synth from the 1980s. The extended 73-note keyboard means that there is a large slab of free space on the top right of the synth. This, however, is quite useful for placing a laptop, mouse or additional synth, and ASM kindly provide a screw-on extension bracket which increases the depth and usefulness of this area – a nice touch.

The Hydrasynth sound engine is an all-digital affair, and in this version offers 16-voice polyphony in single mode, or two sets of eight-voice polyphony when using the dual or key split modes. The synth engine itself has three oscillators per voice. Two of the oscillators operate in both Single and Wavescan modes while the third is Single mode only. The same range of wave shapes are available to all oscillators but Wavescan mode adds some interesting movement options not available in the more conventional single mode (which simply allows you to choose a waveform from one of the 219 on-board). Wavescan mode is closest to wavetable synthesis, though in this instance you can choose up to eight different waveforms to morph between (unlike traditional systems where you are often restricted to a specific wavetable sets). If these were the only sound generating options then you'd already have a decent synth, but the ASM unit goes quite a bit further as each of the two main oscillators can in turn be extruded through the so-called Mutator Modules (two for each oscillator).

Mutators allow you to dial-in conventional techniques such as pulse width modulation (PWM) and oscillator sync, but also extend to linear FM and oscillator stacking, to more obscure forms of phase shifting and harmonic mutation. These add a whole additional level of harmonic mangling to the individual waveforms, and mean that the synth can cover an enormous range of tones and timbres. One important aspect is that, where relevant, the Mutators include their own internal oscillator sources, freeing-up each main oscillator for its own distinct blend of techniques. Finally a ring modulation in the noise section can be pressed into action before all of these audio streams are combined in the mixer module.

Next we come to the filters which

THE ALTERNATIVES

Modal Argon 8X £649

Modal's Argon is an all-digital 8-voice wavetable synth with an impressive spec and free desktop editor/librarian app.

modalelectronics.com

ASM Hydrasynth Explorer £519

If you want the Hydrasynth sound engine, but don't need the split/layering, larger keyboard or as many programming controls the Hydrasynth Explorer may be enough.

ashunsoundmachines

Novation Summit £1659

A great-sounding hybrid synth, which also has a dual mode for layering and splitting its voices.

novationmusic.com

MODULE SELECT: Programming is simplified by the dedicated Module Selection buttons. With the added benefit of showing the standard signal flow within the internal sound engine.

ARP: The on-board arpeggiator gets its own extensive control section, and goes far beyond classic up/down patterns, adding ratcheting, phrase playback and other features.

RIBBON: This controller can be used for pitch bend or as a modulation or trigger source, but also features a Theremin mode where one voice is reserved for melodic playback.

CV/GATE: Although digital, the synth has a good array of analogue connectivity, including two CV modulation ins and outs as well as dedicated CV/Gate and Clock outputs.

can be run in series or parallel. The first comes with a good complement of analogue-style filters referenced from some classic topologies, and with a vocal formant filter thrown in for good measure. The low-pass 'ladder' filters also include compensated versions which avoid the common problem of reduced bass response at increased resonance settings – something that would be fiddly to do in the analogue realm. Filter 2 is limited to two variations on a 2-pole state variable filter. Taken together there's plenty of shaping.

Of course, modulation sources play a massive role in how effectively the audio components are used, and the Hydrasynth doesn't disappoint with its five envelopes and five LFOS – not forgetting the polyphonic aftertouch keyboard and other controller sources all routed through the 32-slot modulation matrix. Special mention should be made of the voice module options Analog Feel and Warm Mode, and the very good three-stage effects section with excellent reverb. The arpeggiator also feels well thought-out.

The increased voice count on the Deluxe is nice (though not essential for most regular patches). This makes a difference in Multi Mode where the extra polyphony allows for more complex sound design and layered or split patches (see boxout). This flexibility of approach also means you could simply use the two sound engines as entirely separate synths, particularly as they each have their own set of outputs available. Remember also that the Hydra plays well with modular systems via its seven CV, Gate, Clock and Modulation jacks on the front panel. These can be configured for a wide range of voltage and signal standards, and the Mod inputs can also be a modulation source in the Mutator Modules.

This makes the Hydrasynth Deluxe a very good performance synth as well as great control, processing and sound generator hub for the studio. **FM**

DELUXE MULTI MODE

The Hydrasynth Deluxe has double the voice count of the original and can employ this in a dual layered, split or overlapped configuration with a complete, and entirely separate, sound engine available to each. Unlike some synths, where compromises have to be made when combining independent patches, the Deluxe's multimode allows changes to be made and saved completely separately to the Single mode patches. The results of this dual approach can be extremely compelling, especially once you realise that you have two separate arpeggiators and two completely independent multi-effects sections with which to play. This type of flexibility is great when it comes to detailed sound design, but also offers a lot to the performing musician where different sound elements can be assigned to different areas of the keyboard.

FM VERDICT

9.0

A great-sounding, flexible synth, ideal as a performance-led keyboard that can reach a wide range tones and textures

Knobula Poly Cinematic

£320

This synth voice that doubles as a standalone synth can make you some sounds worthy of the bigscreen, says **Rob Redman**

CONTACT **WHO:** Knobula **WEB:** knobula.com **KEY FEATURES** 8 voice polyphony, All in one synth, Built in reverb

I generally warm up to a conclusion, but today I'll jump straight in and say the Poly Cinematic is fantastic. It covers a lot of sonic ground in a simple to navigate and intricate device with a clever trick up its sleeve.

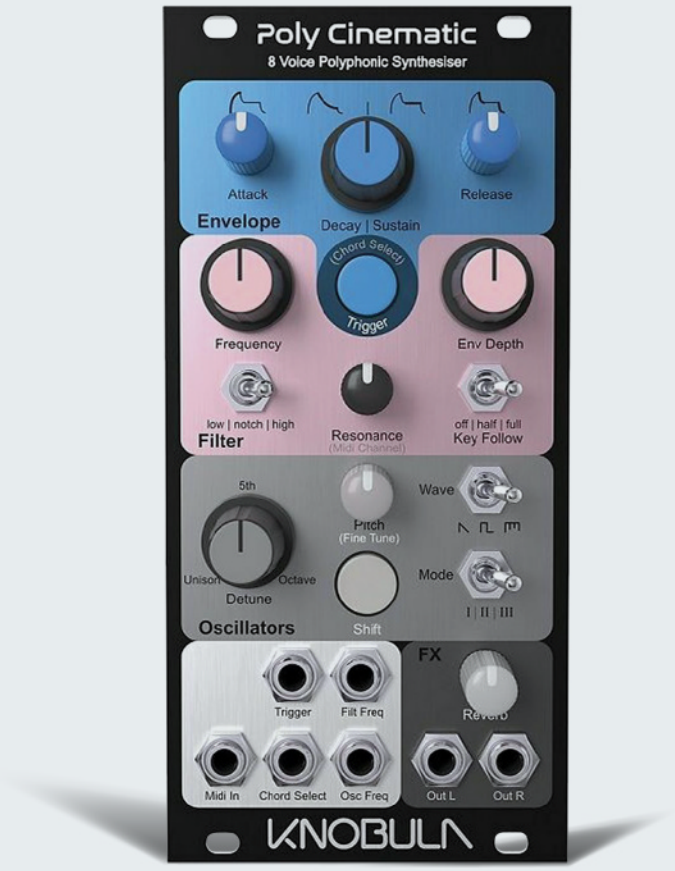
The module itself is just 12hp wide and 40mm deep, meaning even tiny rigs can benefit from 8-note polyphony. That alone is worth the price, but things get better. As well as being a synth voice it's pretty much a standalone synth, with built-in filter, envelope generator and effects.

Starting at the top you'll find the envelope section, which has attack and release, with a split function decay/sustain control. The knobs feel good with little slop.

Next up is the filter section, with a switch for mode (low-pass, notch and high-pass), resonance frequency, envelope depth and a final three-way toggle for keyboard tracking which is great to see on such a svelte module.

Below that is the oscillator section, the beating heart of the Poly Cinematic. Here you'll find the detune, which is marked at unison, 5th and octave points. The detune sounds are pretty broad and run from the mild to the wild, cleaning up as you turn the control nearer to each defined point, as you'd expect. This is great for beefing up chords or creating more dissonant drones. There's an overall pitch control with a shift button for fine tuning, then two toggles. One for waveform selection, which are supersaw, square and tonewheel. I love that the tonewheel was included as it's one of the prettiest sounds I've heard from a module. It can do the whole organ thing perfectly but experimenting with the envelopes and filters pays off. Each waveform has three variations, selected by the second toggle. The changes are subtle but useful.

The real magic comes in with the chord memory. Plug in a MIDI keyboard and you have access to eight-voice polyphony. Great but not unique. However, use a mod wheel for location selection and you can commit eight chords to onboard memory, then trigger them using CV for chord select and trigger. As this uses CV there are boundless options for integrating this into a rig/patch and it's a real joy to work with. CV control is there for filter frequency and the obligatory volts per octave. All this adds up to a truly huge, expressive but compact synth and that's before I even mention the lush onboard 24-bit reverb. **FM**



FM VERDICT

9.0

Polyphony in Eurorack usually takes valuable hp. The Poly Cinematic does it with aplomb and sounds gorgeous at the same time

THE PROS & CONS

+

Intuitive interface

Wide tonal range

Comes with everything onboard

–

For best results it needs a MIDI keyboard with it

ASM Hydrasynth Explorer £519

ASM Hydrasynth goes portable. **Bruce Aisher** asks if the Chinese brand's latest outing is likely to make a splash

CONTACT **WHO:** Ashun Sound Machines **WEB:** ashunsoundmachines.com **KEY FEATURES** 8-voice polyphonic digital wave morphing synthesizer. CV/Gate, USB and MIDI connectivity. 3-octave mini-keyboard with POLYTOUCH™ Polyphonic Aftertouch. External or battery power options

A few years back, a synth arrived from a new brand that garnered significant interest: the Hydrasynth, from Ashun Sound Machines, a Chinese company with a multinational team involved in the design and creation of their instruments. What really grabbed people when the original Hydrasynth was first announced was the surprisingly flexible sound generation system combined with the plentiful real-time control that included polyphonic aftertouch (a relative rarity amongst synths even today). When people started to use and hear the synth, this interest turned to genuine excitement. This is sure to continue as ASM recently announced both portable and larger dual-engine versions to go with the original four-octave and desktop versions of the original.

A quick recap of the Hydrasynth sound engine's offerings: each voice (of the eight available) gets three oscillators, all capable of selecting from over 200 different wave forms. However, the first two oscillators each have a couple of 'Mutator' modules which mangle the initial waveform in a range of ways. After mixing these together, alongside ring modulator and noise sources, two filters give further shaping. Modulation and control is addressed with a multitude of envelopes and LFOs and the famed Hydra 'Polytouch' (polyphonic aftertouch) alongside pitch bend and modulation ribbons. Mention must be also made of the great effects – for once not just a functional add-on.

> It's good to see ASM making efforts to cater for a range of synth users

It's good to see ASM making efforts to cater for a range of users. They obviously had to make some compromises in terms of direct control with this version, and while the larger screen and more hands-on approach of the original is missed, the sound engine and quality of the synth's output remains.

The keyboard clearly has its limitations in terms of playability, but given the diminished size, it does the job adequately, and the polyphonic aftertouch features remain the same as the original – though a degree of tweaking might be required to get the best out of the smaller keys on this front. I was less fond of the ribbon-based pitch and mod wheels, though the experience did improve with familiarity. CV/Gate, modulation and clock outputs are still available via the back panel, though the voltage-based modulation inputs have been dropped along with the large lateral ribbon of the original. This does mean that users who want to integrate their synth more fully with a modular rig should opt for a full-size version. However, all these can perhaps be forgiven given the Explorer's compact and portable remit – don't forget that you can be truly mobile with this synth as it claims up to four hours' battery life from decent AAs. Another winner for ASM. **FM**

FM VERDICT

8.7

A compact, portable synth which retains the allure of the polyphonic aftertouch selling point of the original, albeit with tinier keys

THE PROS & CONS

+

The same great Hydrasynth sound engine and effects

Even this smaller version has polyphonic aftertouch

It's portable and can be run on batteries

–

The small keys make subtle playing and polyphonic modulation harder

The reduced interface is not quite as clear or easy to use as on the original full-size synth

Casio PX-S3100

£839

Have Casio made "the world's slimmest digital stage piano without compromising on sound"? **Matt Mullen** reports

CONTACT **WHO:** Casio **WEB:** casio.com **KEY FEATURES** 88 keys, Smart Scaled hammer action keyboard, 700 voices, 200 built-in rhythms, 192-note polyphony, Bluetooth audio and MIDI connectivity, optional battery power, included SP-3 pedal, 2 x 8W amplifiers **DIMENSIONS:** 1322 x 232 x 102 mm **WEIGHT:** 11.4kg

This year, Casio has upgraded the popular PX-S series digital pianos, bringing them up to date with Bluetooth connectivity, a redesigned speaker system and more. The PX-S3100 is the more capable instrument of the two, boasting a broader range of onboard sounds and more opportunity for tone-shaping in the effects department than its little brother, the PX-S1100. Coming in at 232mm in depth, it's the slimmest digital piano on the market, and at 11.4kg it's one of the most portable options too.

The PX-S3100 delivers a fantastic collection of 700 onboard sounds. The stars of the show are the 24 piano voices, which offer variations on the standard concert grand (the 'mellow' setting is particularly impressive) alongside genre-specific options for pop, jazz, rock and even ambient music. The voices offer an admirably faithful recreation of an acoustic piano's tone, down to minute details like string and damper resonance and mechanical action noise, which can be tweaked in the Music Space app.

Aside from the piano tones, there's a varied selection of sounds that includes electric pianos, organs, strings, guitars, basses, synths and sound FX. There's also a ton of possibilities for effects processing, the most useful being a pretty sophisticated reverb alongside chorus, flanger and more. Thanks to a newly implemented speaker system powered by dual 8W amplifiers, the PX-S3100 sounds noticeably better than its predecessor. The dynamic range is broader, there's more presence and definition, and the bass response is improved.

So far, so good. It's not all roses, though. When it comes to the piano's action, feel and playability, the PX-S3100 is decent enough, but doesn't quite stack up against other contenders in this price bracket, such as Roland's FP-30X. Perhaps due to slight compromises made in achieving the piano's compact form factor, the action is a touch less natural-feeling than we'd like. However, that's not to say the PX-S3100 isn't responsive to play. For anyone other than experienced pianists, the action's not likely to be an issue, and certainly doesn't outweigh the piano's many plusses.

Speaking of which, we were particularly taken with the piano's design. Sleek, modern and stylish, the look of the PX-S3100 hits all the right notes, with the smooth, touch-sensitive backlit interface putting many-buttoned competitors like the Yamaha P-125 to shame.

On top of its impressive aesthetic, the Casio's outstanding array of features is where it really hits a home run. The headline here is the Bluetooth connectivity, which spans both audio and MIDI, giving you oodles of possibilities. There's also a 3-track, 5-song MIDI recording and playback system that's useful for both composition and practice. For players who find it helpful to play along with a backing track, there are 200 onboard rhythms and auto-accompaniment.

These, along with almost every other feature, can be tweaked from the Music Space app, which hooks up to the piano via the included Bluetooth adapter and gives useful functions like a score viewer, piano roll and concert simulator.

The PX-S3100 is a brilliant choice for any amateur pianist moving out of the beginner bracket seeking more functionality and a decent sound, or gigging musicians in need of a stage piano that's portable, reliable, and good value. **FM**

A brilliant choice for any amateur pianist moving out of the beginner bracket

FM VERDICT

8.4

An impressive bundle of features in a slim, stylish and portable package that exceeds competitors in all areas but one

THE PROS & CONS

+

Upgraded speakers make a noticeable difference to sound

Bluetooth audio and MIDI connectivity is genuinely useful

Battery power and portability means you can take it anywhere you like

–

Action is not quite up to scratch for pro-level players

t.akustik Vocal Head Booth £333

Taming annoying room ambience is important for vocals. **Jon Musgrave** sets up this impressive-looking solution

CONTACT **WHO:** Thomann **KEY FEATURES** Adjustable mic holder, Aluminium tube to mount regular pop filter, Headphone hook, Magnetic lyric holder, Magnetic battery power LED light, Adjustable slide up back panel, Integrated 35mm mounting plate for use with large tripod, Constructed from 40 mm PET polyester with black lacquered MDF board base **DIMENSIONS:** 75 x 53 x 54cm, **WEIGHT:** 7.8kg

THE PROS & CONS

+

Many handy integrated features

Substantially reduces the room ambience

Well constructed with quality finish

Good value

–

Booth has its own acoustic

You'll need a decent space to store it when it's not in use

A fraction of the cost of a more permanent room treatment or isolation booth

Acoustic treatment can seriously improve the reliability of both your recording and listening spaces. But what if permanent changes aren't an option or you simply need to improve things quickly? That's where a portable vocal booth comes into play. We've seen various efforts at this over the years, including some very similar to this one (Isovox 2 Vocal Booth for example). It's clearly an attractive concept, and the latest design I have on trial, Vocal Head Booth, comes from Thomann's t-akustik brand.

Vocal Head Booth is made primarily from 40mm PET polyester fibre. This is a reasonably dense but still springy fibrous material that once manufactured forms pretty rigid panels with a clean, stable finish. For the Vocal Head Booth these are self supporting and joined together on the edges. So, along with a black lacquered MDF baseboard you have a reasonably sturdy, large hood (roughly 75 x 53 x 54cm) with shaped sections either side to accommodate your shoulders. It's bulky though not unrealistically heavy (7.8kg). It's designed to go on a standard 35mm equipment tripod, and one of these is included if you buy the bundle deal.

The hood has a number of rather cool features. Firstly, it includes a slide-in mic holder with 50mm of height adjustment. Then on the underside of the baseboard is a pop filter mounting bar and a large headphone hook. The base board has a 30mm wide slot, which helps neatly accommodate not only your popshield arm and mic cable but allows you to introduce a regular mic stand into the space if desired. Inside the hood you've got a magnetic clip high up behind the mic for your lyric sheet, and there's also a magnet to mount the included battery powered LED spotlight. Finally, there's a slot-in piece of PET that goes behind your head and can be adjusted up or down, or removed.

So how does it deliver sonically? The first thing to notice once you get your head inside the space is how dead it is. Just listening without headphones, it really does take away the ambience in the room. So how does this translate to the mic sound? Firstly, there is an obvious difference when you add the rear slotted section behind your head, meaning you essentially have two degrees of reduction. Next up, aside from the reduced room sound, the mic does sound different inside the hood, with a boost in the low mid frequencies. It's certainly not a deal-breaker, and it should come as no surprise that the booth has its own acoustic response. Nevertheless, this as well as the slightly claustrophobic environment inside the hood are worth mentioning. However, there's no denying the Vocal Head Booth considerably reduces the room ambience that gets on the mic, quite an achievement. I guess the only other thing is it's quite large, so you need somewhere to store it.

The Vocal Head Booth reduces on mic ambience, delivering a tight sound, and is a fraction of the cost of more permanent room treatment or an isolation booth. Overall it's a solid effort that I'm very impressed by. **FM**

FM VERDICT

8.6

It may not be the most portable room acoustic device we've tried, but it is by far one of the most effective. If you truly want to reduce room ambience on speech and vocals, it's an excellent option

Novation FLkey Mini and FLkey 37 from £100

Novation introduce the first dedicated MIDI keyboards for FL Studio, in 37-key and Mini formats. **Martin Delaney** gets fruity...

CONTACT **WHO:** Novation **WEB:** novationmusic.com **KEY FEATURES** Fully integrated with FL Studio, including the Sequencer, Channel Racks and Mixer; 16 pads for performance and slicing; eight knobs for volume, pan, and automation; transport buttons; FL Studio plugin preset browsing; chord mode (FLkey 37 only); software suite includes FL Studio Producer Edition 6-month trial, virtual instruments and effects. **PRICING:** FLkey 37 – £199.99 FLkey Mini – £99.99

THE PROS & CONS

+

Quality controllers with immediate access to important FL Studio functions

FLkey 37 users will benefit from the larger size; FLkey Mini users will like the portability

The control layout is as clear as could be, and we like the brutalist square case

The pads are great – sequencing is a real breeze

–

Not keyboards that you'd use for multiple DAWs

Would love to shoehorn a display onto the Mini!

Given how long FL Studio has been around in its various forms (Fruity Loops came out in 1998, can you believe it?), the question is really 'why didn't this happen sooner?'. Akai's Fire gave FL users their first dedicated controller, and now Novation bring us the FLkey 37 and Mini keyboard controllers. We had both the FLkey 37 and Mini in for review – we'll focus mainly on the 37, and refer to the Mini only when there are differences between the two models. They're both grey and unashamedly boxy; stylistically more in common with hardware synths than generic MIDI keyboards. Physically and functionally, these are directly comparable to Novation's Launchkeys, which cater for Ableton Live users.

The top panel of the FLkey 37 includes pitch and mod wheels, 16 RGB backlit pads, eight knobs, an LCD display, and 24 buttons. Then of course there's the keyboard, a rather nice 37-key affair. The rear panel features USB connection, full size MIDI DIN out (excellent to see this), and a 1/4" sustain pedal input. The FLkey Mini lacks a display, and has touch strips for pitch and mod, with just 10 buttons. The rear panel features are the same, other than the fact that the MIDI DIN has been replaced by a 1/8" jack which will need an adaptor to connect to other gear. Putting them side by side, there's no feeling that the Mini is a cop-out, it feels perfectly credible in its own right. The software bundle features a six-month trial of FL Studio Producer Edition, as well as XLN Audio Addictive Keys, Klevgrand Reverb, Klevgrand DAW Cassette, Applied Audio Systems Session Bundle, and Spitfire Audio Expressive Strings. For the review, we required an updated version of FL Studio, and this will be available to all by the time the keyboards reach the stores.

Key info

The FLkey 37's keys are of the full-size synth-type variety, and they're part of what makes this such an enjoyable controller, contributing to the out-of-the computer vibe. The pads are velocity sensitive, and change colour depending on the job at hand for added visual feedback. The knobs are large enough to get a decent hold on, and all of the buttons are backlit so they're identifiable in a shady environment. The Mini has its compromises, but the functionality's still there; still good for instruments, finger drumming (and velocity sensitive), as well as button functions. The Scale modes apply to notes played on both the keyboard and pads. Press Shift/Scale to select a scale, referring to the display on the 37, and the labelled keys on the Mini. When the Scale button is lit, the last selected scale is playable on the pads or keys. The 37 also has a chord mode, where one will be played per keyboard note, or they can be generated based on a selected scale, or custom chords can be triggered from the pads. Alongside the pads are preset buttons, which are used to navigate through instrument presets in FL Studio, while referring to the display (accomplished via the Shift/Octave buttons on the Mini); this is a massive convenience if you're in the zone during a session. There are also buttons for navigating Channel Racks, transport control, the Score Log (which captures your most recently played MIDI part – on the 37 only), and undo/redo.

Pad lightly

The pads are part of the navigation process, as we've already alluded to, and we preferred this method in comparison to some other hardware devices we've used, where there was just too much scrolling on little displays. For example, press Shift/Instrument, to interact with the current instrument settings, either

THE ALTERNATIVES

Akai Fire £149

There aren't many dedicated controllers for FL Studio – the first was Akai's Fire, which takes a different tack from the FLkeys, based around 4x16 pads. This device focuses on particular elements, rather than trying to fit everything in.

akaipro.com

Image-Line Remote £free

This is a free controller app that'll run on either iOS or Android, and connects to a Mac or Windows computer hosting FL via wifi. It combines pre-configured tabs that correspond to specific FL areas, as well as user-configurable elements.

image-line.com

SCREEN SAVER: The 37's LCD display is an important source of info, watch it as you select/move the different elements on the control surface. Also useful for tracking notes and CCs if using it in custom mode

PAD IT OUT: On both keyboards, the two rows of pads serve multiple functions, from triggering notes, to sequencing, to selecting different FL Studio interface parts, such as volume, pan, and plugin parameters

MORE CONTROL: This row of eight knobs directly relates to selections made with the pads – for example, press Shift/Mixer Volume to select that function, then each knob will handle track volume within the Mixer

BEND IT: Adding to the hands-on interactivity, there are pitch and mod controls on each keyboard. FLkey37 has the more old-school wheels for each function, with the pitch wheel bouncing back into place

through the pads with something like the Slicex sampler, or through the knobs and keys with the Fruity DX10 keyboard instrument. We found it was easy to develop an organic workflow, loading presets, sequencing patterns, tweaking effects, and playing the keys; long stretches of time pass by without feeling the need to touch a keyboard or trackpad. For us, the sequencing was the most enjoyable part of the process; loading a sound, sequencing a few patterns in a rack, then playing the keyboard on top – a fluid, productive experience.

No limits

If you want to go beyond the default factory assignments, you can use Novation's Components browser-based editor to create custom assignments. The pads can be repurposed to send any MIDI note, CC, or PC, on any channel, with or without velocity; all very useful if you use more than one DAW, or if you use external hardware.

What we have here are two very nice keyboard controllers, that we think will become the no-brainer de facto hardware controllers for FL Studio. As with the best of these controllers, it feels like the software has broken out into hardware-world, there's a noticeable reduction in time spent looking at the computer screen or reaching for a mouse or trackpad. The Mini is a flexible little controller that you can take anywhere, and fits into the smallest nook in your studio or live rig, but if we were going to choose just one model, it'd be the FLkey 37; that display and the extra buttons, and the expanded playing functions make it worth the extra money and the extra space, recommended for any FL Studio user seeking keyboard integration and hardware control. FM

PADS VS KEYS

There have been times when it looked like pad-based controllers were primed to take over the world, but that hasn't happened yet. Go to any gig or jam session, and you'll still see more keyboards than pads! These offerings from Novation strike a perfect balance – providing a choice of keyboard size and range, but also with two rows of pads. And the design is such that the pads are highly functional even if you don't want to use them to play beats or other sounds (though you can even view a little virtual MIDI keyboard on them, which is kind of weird when there's a real keyboard right there). They're part of the navigation interface, and are used to select functions on the keyboard, to preview sounds, and so on.

FM VERDICT

8.7

Competition isn't fierce, but these (37 in particular), are superb controllers for FL Studio – essential for live and studio use alike

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Beyerdynamic M 90 Pro X £269

Large capsule condensers are a vital studio tool. **Jon Musgrave** plugs up this new one from Beyerdynamic

CONTACT **WHO:** Beyerdynamic **WEB:** beyerdynamic.com **KEY FEATURES** **CAPSULE:** 34mm true condenser **FREQUENCY RANGE:** 20Hz – 20 kHz **MAX SPL:** 133dB SPL **IMPEDANCE:** 180 Ohms **SENSITIVITY:** 36.3mV/Pa **EQUIVALENT NOISE:** 5.6dB A-weighted **SIGNAL TO NOISE (relative to 1 Pa):** 88.4dBA **PHANTOM POWER:** 20 to 52V **DIMENSIONS:** 197 x 52mm **WEIGHT:** 0.30 kg

The M 90 Pro X is a new large capsule cardioid condenser from Beyerdynamic and forms part of their wider Pro X range of mics and headphones. Designed for vocal, speech and instrument use, it features a reasonably large, 34mm, true condenser capsule and is phantom-powered. At £269 we can consider this a budget design. Still, out of the box, the package oozes quality. With an attractive large headstock, and a well damped case with no annoying resonances when tapped, there's lots to like about the physical design. Meanwhile the included suspension mount is broad (about 14cm) but very low profile, top to bottom, with a cup section that accommodates the bottom of the mic. This all slots together nicely, and the combo of plastic and metal means the overall rig including the cradle is light. Hidden in the bottom of the box you'll find a proper dual layer 15cm pop shield with flexi arm mount, and both this and the mic body sports Beyerdynamic's latest logo and branding.

A quick look at the spec reveals not only very low self noise but also a very healthy output level, and this was confirmed when I first plugged up the mic. Although we typically use a pop shield for close miking vocals, it's always interesting to see how much the mic can handle without one. The M 90 Pro X actually copes pretty well, and this may be down to the two-layer grille, which appears to have a very fine diffusing inner layer. The proximity effect is also reasonably restrained, and I found it only became obvious when right in close. All this bodes pretty well for vocal and speech use, and once I got the pop shield hooked up, I got excellent intimate sounds that were crisp and clear with nice low mid body, but importantly not unpleasantly boomy. It's great to see a proper two-layer mesh pop shield in a mic bundle. To me these are the only designs that consistently deliver and allow you to get in nice and close without too many problems.

Sonically, the M 90 Pro X sounds pleasantly articulate without being unduly bright and although the frequency plot indicates a broad boost of over 4dB in the upper mids and high frequencies, this is not unduly harsh. So on percussion, for example, I got a pretty smooth response even when miking a bit too close. That said, I did find that although the off axis response is reasonably acceptable to the sides and back, above and below it is quite coloured in higher frequencies. So I'd be less inclined to use the M 90 Pro X as an ambient mic or overhead mic on drums for example. But for close miking instruments such as acoustic guitar this really isn't noticeable, and I like the moderate high frequency lift and the solid but not overbearing low mids.

Overall, I really like this mic. It successfully ticks a number of boxes and although not a complete all rounder is exceptionally well put together and really looks the part. FM

FM VERDICT

9.2

A slick performer that – despite not being a total all rounder – is ideal for any vocals and instrument close miking requirements

THE PROS & CONS

+

Pleasant broad high mid to high frequency lift

Avoids overbearing proximity effect

Excellent, low-noise performance

Really well designed mic and cradle

Includes proper dual-layer pop shield

–

Not ideal for ambient miking needs

Higher Hz Delay

Music equipment reviewers and tutors Higher Hz have branched out into the world of audio effects with their debut plugin, simply entitled Delay. This free plugin does a lot more than just simple repeats, though. The makers behind the plugin make it very clear that their goal with this device was to deviate from the norm, offering features that aren't often found in most delay plugins, and actually removing features that you might expect from other similar products.

We're going to take Delay for a quick spin to try out some of its features, and you can grab it yourself for free from **higherhz.com**

Drive >

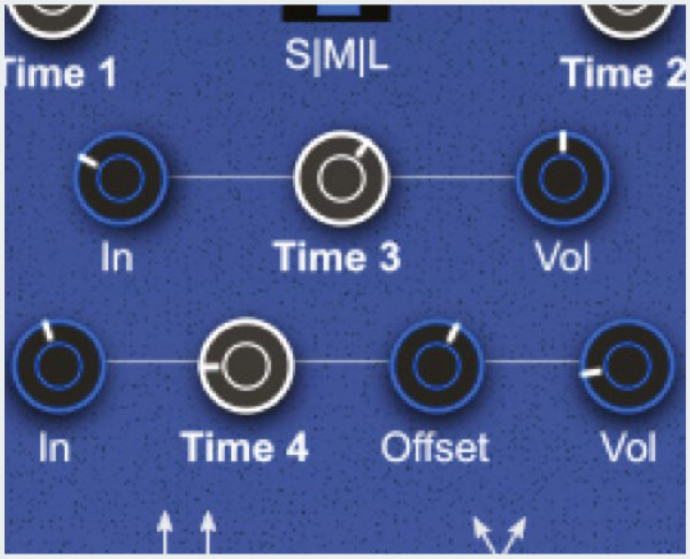
The Drive control is situated at the centre of the plugin and at the beginning of the signal flow. Drive applies soft distortion to both the dry and wet signals, which can create more exciting results than when only applied to the wet signal. It also means that the plugin can be used as a standalone saturation device by turning the Wet parameter all the way down. While you can't achieve a full fuzz-style distortion with the Drive control, you can introduce some unique character to your signal.

Width and filters >

Lo/Hi Pass filter controls sit either side of the Drive dial, and let you shape the tone of your signal before it reaches the first delays. Unlike the Drive control, the 1-pole/6dB filters are only applied to the wet signal, so you can tame the affected signal to sit in your mix while leaving the dry signal intact, or automate the parameters to create builds. Another mix stage control is the 'Wide' parameter, bringing the left/right channels closer to the centre for a simpler mix process.

Delays 1 and 2 >

The signal flows into delays 1 and 2, in hard left/right positions. The Time 1 and 2 dials control overall delay time in unspecified measures, to encourage results driven by your ears and delay times can't be synced to each other. Adjust the overall range of both delay time controls with the S/M/L switch. S has a max range of 25ms for chorus-style effects, M's range tops out at 330ms for short echoes and reverb, and L lets you create longer echoes with a range of 1000ms.

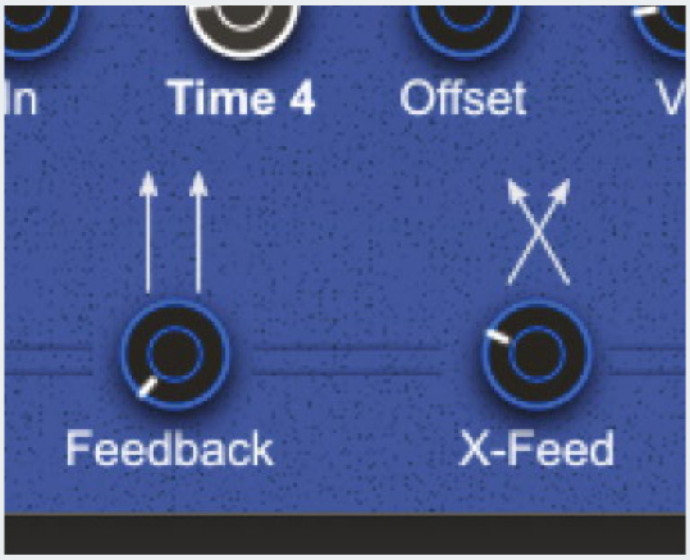


< Delays 3 and 4

Things get hectic with delays 3 and 4. Delay 3 has a set time range of 1000ms, while delay 4's is set at 250ms. Unlike delays 1 and 2 they have independent volume controls for more refined adjustment of the signal. The In dials control the balance between driven signal and the output of the previous delay, adding another layer of control to the plugin. While delay 3 is mono, 4 is stereo with the right hand channel able to be offset by +/- 50ms, making for some interesting stereo effects.

FEEL OVER FUNCTION

While the advancement of technology has brought innovation and accessibility to the world of music production, there is a belief held by some that the modern production process can leave tracks sounding too sterile or regimented. This is partly down to the ability to sync or quantise instruments and effects to a fixed time grid, which takes away some of the feel and groove from music. Higher Hz have challenged this notion by removing not only the sync and quantisation functions from Delay, but by hiding parameter amounts completely. What may initially seem like a design oversight quickly starts to make sense as you tweak the controls to your taste, finding sweet spots in its setup that create unpredictable and unique rhythms and textures.



< Feedback and crossfeed

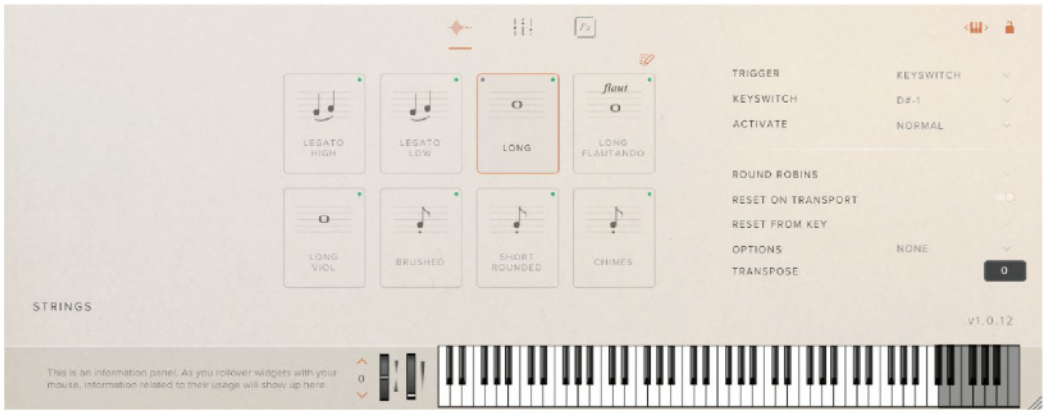
The feedback control returns the output of delay 4 to the start of the signal chain, letting you cycle the wet signal back through the plugin indefinitely. Be careful with feedback, as things can quickly get a little lively. To spice things up even further, the X-Feed control swaps the left and right channels of the delay as it returns to the start of the signal chain. Consider placing a limiter after the effect, when experimenting, to prevent a stray feedback loop from taking out your monitors.

Modulation >

There is a modulation section at the top left of the device, which consists of an LFO with controls for both rate and amount. While the LFO mostly controls delays 1 and 2, Higher Hz says it also affects delays 3 and 4 in a more subtle manner. There are no visible measures on these controls which steers the user based on feel. The LFO is versatile and can create anything from the subtle wow and flutter effects of cassette recordings, right up to warped mind-melting textures.

< Uses and application

As you can probably tell, this device offers a lot more than a common or household delay line. Its assortment of quirky features and unique design highlights Higher Hz's reluctance to follow the status quo when developing this effect. The various delay controls that are combined with the signal coloration offered by the inbuilt drive function create a wealth of creative sound design possibilities for a variety of audio production applications. **FM**



Spitfire Audio – Heirloom £249

As regular readers will know, many of Spitfire's libraries appear to cater primarily to creators of music for film, TV or games. However, the same readers will also know that I regularly point out that these instrument collections often lend themselves to a wide range of genres – especially if you value originality over sonic conformity. Although Heirloom – subtitled 'The Emotional Ensemble' – covers some classic Spitfire territory, as with many other Spitfire creations, the devil is in the detail. This library takes a toolkit approach, intended on giving a complete set of matched elements, and focusses on organic 'analogue' composition. Piano and electric guitar are combined with an 8-piece string section, contrabass clarinet and tubax. What's a tubax you might ask? Well, whilst the more imaginative out there might conjure an image of something resembling an electric guitar welded to a tuba, it is in fact half tuba and half sax – makes sense really.

Ultimately, and as mentioned already, it's the detail that counts here, so the piano is an upright recorded in pedal 'up and down' variants and the other instruments incorporate a range of sensitively-played playing styles presented in up to nine mic/signal variations (including a final mix version and even tape and listener/player positions). These can be mixed independently – though it would be useful to be able to see all the mic faders on one page. The plugin GUI is very spacious, so it should be easy to do. However, given that the same issue comes up with other Spitfire instruments that employ large numbers of articulations, there may be some underlying quirk of the window layout programming that makes this harder than it looks. Still – it is a little annoying.

An important element in a collection such as this is the actual recording space, and Spitfire rarely disappoint on this front. This time the sessions were recorded in London's famed Church Studios, and sound excellent.

In terms of more universal usage and appeal the piano and guitar are both immensely enjoyable to play, with some of the later's tones being quite mesmerising. That being said, the strings and other elements are of very high quality and, perhaps just as importantly, extremely playable, and with excellent dynamic response. Taken together, Heirloom is a lovely collection with which you can easily create soft and realistic music beds or fully formed pieces. The fact that they were recorded in the same space, and with all the flexibility that the multi-mic scenario entails only enhances this aspect of the library.

Preset, articulation and mic mix are all managed via the dedicated plugin where you can also add some appropriate reverb in the effects section.

This type of quality doesn't come cheap, but neither would a recording session featuring recording, playing and an ambient space of this quality. ***Bruce Aisher***
spitfireaudio.com

VERDICT 9.0

Arthouse Acoustics – Unicorn Tears From $7.99/month

Winner of Most Emo Sample Pack Title goes to… these guys. Love it! And once inside, there are more treats, as it's filled to the line with lo-fi soul, alt R&B, trap, and downtempo samples, that'll have you shedding your own tears of joy.

The properly processed and magically mangled melodies in this deep, dense set are ripened with warmth, width, and wickedness, as each drop of sensual sound has been wrung out, just the way you like it. Choose from plaintive female one-shot vocals, resampled lead loops, moody guitar riffs, and some punchy AF snares and kicks. They're all a blast.

There's a mad cool drumkit, plumped with bespoke beats for you to get your grubbies all over, too. ***Roy Spencer***

splice.com

VERDICT 9.0

Sample Magic – Ambient Glitch From $7.99/month

After this trip to the fringes of experimental electronica you'll be in proud possession of a fair few crates of left-field layers, amorphous audio, and nebulous noise. All fit to freak and flesh out your next ambient IDM masterpiece.

The fun stuff comes weeping out the speakers like a glitchy gloop and the seriously shredded percussion, in a sweet swamp of digital dust, is as potent as it is processed. It's all quite mesmerising. Before you get too far down this rabbit hole of woozy, ambient, soundscapes, check in on the Astra patches, Serum presets and beatmaker kits, which should snap you back to reality. *Roy Spencer*

splice.com

VERDICT 7.0

Renegade Audio – The Producer Series: Krak In Dub Vol 1 £19.95

To kickstart its new artist-led sample series, the team at Renegade Audio cherry-picked an Argentinian producer with a style all of his own. The man known as Krak In Dub has been serving his signature sound of jungalistic digital Euro dub for 20 years. And, across this 1.88GB set of soundboy samples, he showcases his way with the wobble, for everyone out there needing his low-end logic. From rude riddims and skanking synths, to DnB lead and reggae bass, he knows how to make his E-mu sampler sing, and having heard the Sherman-filtered results, you'll thank him. *Roy Spencer*

loopmasters.com

VERDICT 8.0

Loopmasters – Havana Meets Kingston £39.95

When Australian producer Mista Savona connected some of Jamaica's finest musicians with the best Cuba has to offer, two wonderful fusion albums were made. Legendary stickmen like Rodney Barreto and pianist Victor Campbell get live and loose, running things through nothing but vintage analogue gear for that authentic golden era sound. Elsewhere there's wild percussion, fiery horns, more deft drumming, and plenty of extra piano, guitar, and bass riffs to lift any track. A rich, rewarding release, offering up a rare chance to pick through the playing of some of Havana and Kingston's most revered musical icons. *Roy Spencer*

loopmasters.com

VERDICT 9.0

Audiotent – Elusive £37

Exclusive preset library for NI's beloved Massive synth. The 107 designs in this killer collection tick off all the boxes, as they cover a vast amount of super fresh sounds, and others that recall some iconic tracks from dance music's glorious past. Eagle-eyed club kids will spot the clues when auditioning ones with names like "Jitled" and "Azido", and then get audio flashbacks as they meld and mould some of the iconic sounds into twisted new shapes. Flexibility is key here, with endless possibilities opening up before your very ears, as you mindfully twiddle. Even the the finest movements yield impressive results – a razor sharp new weapon in the on-going battle against boring beats. *Roy Spencer*

audiotent.com

VERDICT 8.0

Bitwig Studio 4.2 €399

12 months on, Bitwig have doubled down on the creative sequencing tools added in version 4. Si Truss takes another look

CONTACT **WHO:** Bitwig **WEB:** bitwig.com **KEY FEATURES** Fully-equipped DAW with 130+ devices and modulators, plus Grid modular environments with 150+ modules. Purchase includes 12-month update plan

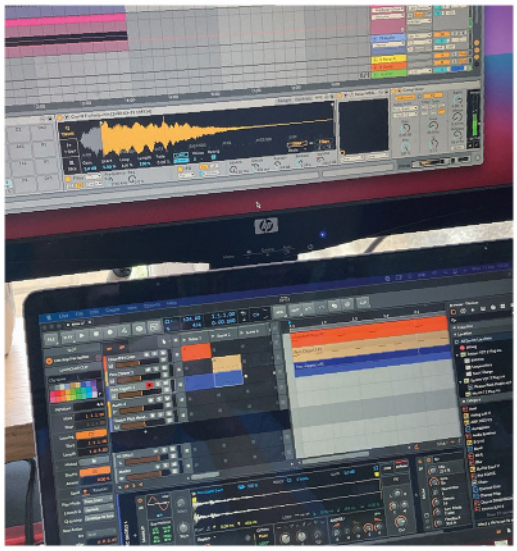
I've been a vocal fan of Bitwig Studio in these pages since version 1, but I was, initially, slightly underwhelmed by version 4 when I reviewed it. Whereas versions 2 and 3 introduced seismic new features that radically expanded the capabilities of the DAW – the unified modulation system and modular Grid, respectively – the comping and note Operators introduced for Bitwig 4 were comparatively conservative additions.

As acknowledged at the time though, this comparison was arguably unfair due to the way Bitwig's update plans works. Rather than simply buy each version outright, users activate a 12-month update plan that immediately gives them access to the latest version, but also any new updates – however big or small – within the time the plan is active. As a result, the developers seem to have shifted emphasis away from big, headline-grabbing reinventions of the DAW in favour of regular, significant 'point' updates throughout the lifespan of each version. It makes more sense, in that case, to give Bitwig Studio 4 a proper appraisal now, 12 months on from when it first launched in public Beta.

Any user that rushed out to reactivate their upgrade plan the moment Bitwig 4 was announced will have also subsequently gained access to version 4.1 and 4.2 in the months since. Taken together, the package offered by those updates is considerably more substantial than the update to version 4 alone.

The Note FX that were the main focus of 4.1 feel very much like a complimentary side dish to v4's Operators. Whereas the Operators were randomising and retriggering tools that applied variations directly to MIDI notes on the piano roll, the Note FX are an array of devices that can process incoming MIDI in real time. The general remit of the two features is very similar though, allowing users to apply complex but highly controllable variations to

BITWIG VS ABLETON: THE LONG VIEW



When Bitwig Studio was first launched, much was made of it shared history with Ableton Live. Despite developing in its own direction in recent years, the comparisons between the two are still unavoidable, in the overall design, workflow and several notable tools. However, this similarity is actually a large part of the appeal. The two are now different enough to fill individual creative roles, but similar enough that swapping between the two isn't as jarring as, say, hopping between Live and Cubase or Logic. Switching from one to the other can inspire new ideas, without having to learn a new workflow.

otherwise simple MIDI parts.

Those Note FX come in the form of eight new devices that range from the straightforward-sounding Note Repeats and Humanize to the likes of Bend, Dribble and Ricochet. Despite its straightforward-sounding name, it's Note Repeats I've found myself turning to most regularly. In typical Bitwig fashion, this does more than you might think, the highlight being a semi-hidden Euclidean sequencer. However, the fun of the Note FX – and Operators for that matter – doesn't come from any one particular tool so much as toying with the out-there, unexpected possibilities of combining different processes to generate surprising patterns.

With 4.2 Bitwig have addressed one of the less developed areas of the DAW: audio effects. While Bitwig Studio has always had a solid crop of processors, it lacked real standout, characterful tools to match the likes of Ableton's Echo or Logic's Space Designer. Admittedly, these latest additions – Flanger+, Phaser+ and Chorus+ – aren't going to inspire totally new sounds in the way some radical audio effects can, but their analogue-inspired, multi-mode designs go a long way to adding some much-needed character. Crucially, each is also available as a fully routable module within The Grid. I hope this is a model for how new effects will work moving forward.

> Of all the updates, my personal highlight is The Grid's new Note Grid mode

While The Grid already had several delay and filter tools, quick drag-and-drop effect modules are a great addition when you're patching up your own synth routing. How about a convolution reverb next…?

Of all the updates, my personal highlight is The Grid's new Note Grid mode. Like the existing Grid devices, this is a fully modular environment, the key difference being that the aim is to process and output MIDI data. This opens up a world of possibilities for designing your own MIDI effects, unusual sequencers or generative tools, all of which can be routed to any Bitwig Device, plugin or – most enjoyably – external hardware.

What's impressive about Bitwig's drip-feeding of updates is that they not only add to the overall value of the DAW, but complement one another. Operators, Note FX and the Note Grid work together seamlessly, and combine to create a quietly radical and open approach to software-based sequencing. **FM**

FM VERDICT

VALUE

BUILD

LONGEVITY

USEFULNESS

OVERALL

9.5

Bitwig's continued commitment to unique sequencing tools makes v4 a brilliantly creative music-making tool

THE PROS & CONS

+

Note Grid and Note FX are great for generating some unique patterns

New effects add some welcome processing character

Does a good job of justifying 12-month update plans

–

A few more self-contained effect modules for The Grid would be welcome

A CAREER IN GEAR

Ultra Naté

The house grandee breaks down the gear behind some of her biggest hits

© Karl Giant

Singer, songwriter, DJ and producer Ultra Naté is responsible for some of the biggest hits in house music. Born in the US, she found success in Europe after abandoning a major-label contract to work with the now-cult classic house institution Strictly Rhythm. Writing her breakout hit, *Free*, alongside producers Mood II Swing, Naté drew inspiration from R.E.M. in attempting to devise a "rock song that would work in clubs" with a powerful guitar-driven hook. The result became a bona fide '90s house anthem, topping charts across the globe and catapulting Naté to superstardom.

Free turns 25 this year, as Ultra Naté prepares to release her 10th studio album, *ULTRA*. The Billboard G.O.A.T.-honoured dance legend takes us on a tour of her discography as she picks out four pieces of gear that have helped to define her sound, and tells us more about the tracks they inspired.

E-mu SP-1200

HEAR IT ON...

Rejoicing (I'll Never Forget) (Blue Notes In The Basement, 1991)

"Produced by the Basement Boys – Teddy Douglas, Thommy Davis and Jay Steinhour. It was the iconic SP 1200 drum machine that gave my debut album for Warner Brothers its unique Basement Boys sound. The SP 1200's sampling rate of 26kHz, though limited, gives adequate bandwidth to drum sounds, but importantly, it lends them an imperfect personality that a 'perfect sampler' would otherwise have to attempt to imitate!

"This rousing anthem is just one of the highlights showcasing how it was used thoroughly and throughout *Blue Notes In The Basement*'s production. You can hear the 'rawness' of it. The SP 1200 drum machine crafted the Basement Boys sound that would become their recognisable trademark. *Rejoicing (I'll Never Forget)* characterised the thumping gospel stomp synonymous with the early days of house music and Baltimore specifically."

SSL mixing desk

HEAR IT ON...

Twisted (Stranger Than Fiction, 2001)

"Another big piece of gear that was a large part of the recording process in the early days was the SSL board. I remember writing *Twisted* at a studio in London at the board with UK soul legends, D-Influence. Being able to write in person at a studio seems novel these days but this is always a welcome creative process. Between the SSL's famous bus compressor and Total Recall feature, it became an integral part of our writing process and this song's evolution and original production.

"The automation features of the board made it much easier to do multiple passes of a mix. It gave us the ability to multi-track as much as we had wanted between vocals and instruments without having to bounce down anything in order to make space. It kept the process fluid.

> "AT THE TIME WE HAD WHAT SEEMED LIKE ENDLESS RACKS OF OUTBOARD GEAR THAT WE GOT TO PLAY WITH"

Our original song and vocal production would ultimately be handed over to the inimitable talents of 4Hero to bring the exquisite final version across the finish line for my fourth album, *Stranger Than Fiction* becoming a consistent fan favourite."

Neumann TLM 103

HEAR IT ON...

SNL (Ultra Naté and Quentin Harris as Black Stereo Faith, 2017)

"A lot of my recent vocal recording sessions have been at my home studio in Maryland. One of my favourite microphones to use is my Neumann TLM 103. Its low signal-noise ratio is ideal for home studio vocal sessions where sound treatment is minimal and its low self-noise is impressive. Its dynamic range makes it a staple for me.

"I used this while recording a recent collaboration with producer Quentin Harris for our inaugural side project, Black Stereo Faith, as well as last year's collaboration with Funk Cartel, *Supernatural*. It's also been a saving grace and source of respite while writing and recording my forthcoming new album, *ULTRA*. I love how crisp, present, warm and resonant it makes my vocals. It can accurately capture any type of styling I'm aiming for."

Yamaha SPX900

HEAR IT ON...

Free (Situation Critical, 1997)

"The lead single from my third studio album, *Situation Critical* featuring the iconic guitar hook. At the time we had what seemed like endless racks of outboard gear that we got to play with and get the sound we wanted.

"Produced with Mood II Swing (Lem Springsteen and John Ciafone), Yamaha's SPX900 Multi-Effect processor along with Lexicon's classic PCM 80 Reverb and PCM 42 Delay effects processors, were part of what was used to create that unmistakable guitar sound. Because Woody Pak's infectious guitar playing was such a key part of the foundation of *Free* – it was super important to get the tone and colour of the guitar just right. We succeeded!" FM

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

Ultra Naté x Funk Cartel, *Supernatural + Remixes* is available now on BMG

DIGITAL POLYSYNTHS

ASM Hydrasynth Deluxe £699

Full Review: FM383 | The Deluxe is a great-sounding, flexible polysynth, ideal as a performance-led keyboard that can reach a wide range tones and textures.

Korg Modwave £699

Review FM373 Modwave is far from the only wavetable game in town, but it sets itself apart with unique tools and a few added gimmicks.

Korg Wavestate £699

Review FM353 Wavestate walks the line perfectly between paying tribute to a '90s classic and offering cutting-edge tools. A fantastic update to a much-loved synth line.

Waldorf Quantum £3,500

Review: FM336 A stunning piece of hybrid synth design – setting a new benchmark for features, interface and sonics. It's expensive, but a synth that you'll find inspiring for many years.

Korg Opsix £699

Review: FM365 Opsix is packed with unique character, and – rarely for an FM instrument – it's fun and accessible. Another top-class digital synth from Korg.

CREATIVE EFFECT PLUGINS

Arturia Efx Fragments €99

Full Review: FM382 | A powerful sound design tool presented in a user-friendly way. Not the only granular game in town, but still a potential secret weapon.

ValhallaDSP Valhalla Delay $50

Full Review: FM344 Combining a range of excellent-sounding delay modes with some great ambient tools, this is a must-have plugin at a great price.

Output Thermal £84

Full Review: FM360 A well-equipped and creative distortion effect that's capable of a wide range of musical, often inspiring results.

Soundtoys Effect Rack $299

A longtime favourite of many pro producers, Soundtoys' hardware-inspired multi-effect can do everything from faux analogue crunch to out-there FX inspiration.

Eventide H9 plugins $499

Available individually or as one big bundle Eventide's H9 processors – from the pedal of the same name – are tried and tested tools for sound mangling purposes.

MIDI KEYBOARDS

Novation FLkey 37

£200

Full Review: FM383

There might be little in the way of competition when it comes to FL Studio controllers, but Novation's FLkey is a genuinely slick keyboard.

Arturia KeyStep Pro

£339

Full Review: FM324

For melodic sequencing duties and flexible hardware control, this is one of the best keyboard devices around.

Akai MPK mini mk3 £90

Review FM363 A very decent upgrade with genuinely pro features, that cements its position in the top handful of mini keyboard controllers available.

NI Komplete Kontrol A-Series | from £119

Review FM338 A quality controller combined with a well-rounded software bundle.

Arturia MicroLab £69

Review: FM355 This may not tick all the boxes for a studio controller keyboard, but as a super portable travelling device, it hits the mark.

Novation Launchkey Mini Mk3 £110

Review: FM349 Small but well spec'd, this is a convenient and well-made controller that's great with or without Ableton Live.

Novation SL MkIII £540

Review: FM338 Well-designed and versatile. For those who work with both hardware and software, this may be the best studio centrepiece that's on the market.

NI Komplete Kontrol S-Series Mk2 £499

Review: FM324 Komplete Kontrol MkII brings a whole sonic universe under your fingertips like never before, with deeper DAW integration too.

NI Komplete Kontrol M32 £99

The M32 controller takes Native Instruments' Komplete Kontrol concept and places it into a properly portable, entry-level package with impressive results.

Nektar Impact LX88+ £249

Review: FM315 The LX88+ combines a pretty good keyboard with extensive DAW integration, and is about as good as you'll get at this price point.

AFFORDABLE MONITORS

Kali Audio LP-6

£147

These two-way speakers from relative newcomers Kali Audio offer exceptional sound quality at a very reasonable price. An excellent home studio option.

M-Audio BX3 & BX4 from £85

Full Review: FM369 Compact and convenient, M-Audio's new BX monitors expand the appeal of the range and do so at an incredible price.

Adam Audio T5V £133

Full Review: FM335 The T5V delivers plenty of clarity, decent imaging and volume from a pretty compact footprint. A tidy package, all at a good price point.

KRK Rokit G4 from £133

Full Review: FM348 With punchy delivery and an abundance of EQ options, these are the best Rokits yet, offering power at an accessible price.

Yamaha HS5 £155

High-quality, accurate studio monitors offering solid power, imaging and detail at a very reasonable price.

SOFTSYNTH BUNDLES

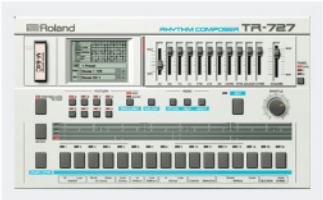
Korg Collection 3

$399

Full Review: FM376 | A broad, varied package that combines some of the most iconic synths of all time with a few more esoteric, characterful oddities.

Arturia V Collection 8 €599

While Arturia's synth emulation bundle doesn't have the 'official' clout of Roland or Korg's there's arguably no better rounded softsynth package on the market.



Roland Cloud From $99 per year

If you're happy to accept the subscription model, then Roland's Cloud service offers access to official recreations of the most iconic instruments of all time.

Native Instruments Komplete 11 £539

Komplete isn't purely synth-focused, but the likes of Massive X, FM8, Monark and Reaktor are undoubted highlights.

U-he All Synths Bundle €780

With just six instruments included, this isn't the best value you'll find, pound-for-pound. But U-he are lauded as one of the best softsynth developers out there for a reason.

soothe2

soothe harshness, save time

SPIFF

transient control, oek-style

YOUR SEARCH FOR THE PERFECT HEADPHONES IS OVER

9021

NTH-100

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RØDE

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